

## **The Folklife of the Georgia Wiregrass Evaluative Narrative**

Georgia Humanities Council Grant

Submitted by Laurie Kay Sommers, December 10, 2001

**PROGRAMS:** The Folklife of the Georgia Wiregrass exhibition toured to the following locations:

Okefenokee Heritage Center, Waycross, March 4-April 3, 2001

Reception March 18, 2001 featuring African American gospel by New Taylor Singers of Blackshear, attendance at reception 35

Cordele Crisp Carnegie Library, Cordele, April 10-May 10, 2001

Reception April 17, 2001 featuring bluegrass by The Boys, attendance at reception 20

Lowndes County Historical Museum, June 18-August 19, 2001

Reception July 14 featuring African American gospel by the Johnson Two of Valdosta, attendance at reception 35

### **PROJECT SUMMARY**

This project updated the traveling exhibition, "Folklife in the Georgia Wiregrass" (previously circulated by the Art's Experiment Station, ABAC, in the late 1980s) with ten new photo text panels and then tour the exhibition to three sites in south Georgia. A special curator's gallery talk was scheduled at each site. In addition, a teacher's guide was prepared to encourage greater use of the exhibition by educators and students as well as more local documentation efforts in south Georgia schools and communities. During a recent assessment conducted in 1998-99, the South Georgia Folklife Project (SGFP) determined a growing need for high quality, easily installed exhibitions for use in smaller museums, galleries, and library exhibition spaces. Georgia Humanities Council moneys in the amount of \$9970 were requested to fund fabrication, design, printing, and advertising. This exhibition reached an underserved rural population of educators, students, and the general public, and complemented ongoing and growing efforts in heritage preservation throughout the region.

The exhibition interprets the traditional agricultural, religious, and community life of the Wiregrass region of South Georgia. The original 24 black and white panels were based on fieldwork conducted in 1977 by a team of folklorists and photographers from the newly founded American Folklife Center (AFC) at the Library of Congress. The AFC team worked with Syd Blackmarr at the Art's Experiment Station in Tifton to study eight counties in south central Georgia, locating, documenting, and assessing the traditional life, work, and art of the region. The fieldworkers paid particular attention to verbal and musical traditions, traditional material culture such as architecture and craft, foodways, occupational and agricultural practices, children's games, outdoor life, and religious expression. More than ten years later the Georgia Folklife Program and the Arts Experiment Station assembled highlights from this work into an exhibit, with folklorist Dr. Tom Rankin as the curator. This exhibition, titled "Folklife in the Georgia Wiregrass," recently was given on permanent loan to the South Georgia Folklife Project at Valdosta State with the understanding that it would be updated and circulated throughout the region.

The AFC fieldwork was the first substantive folklife survey of south central Georgia. The South Georgia Folklife Project (SGFP) at Valdosta State University, founded by Dr. Laurie Sommers in 1996, is continuing and expanding work begun by the AFC team two decades ago. Since its inception, the SGFP has collected over 1500 images, 100 sound recordings, and miscellaneous books, field notes, and vertical file materials from throughout VSU's 41-county service area in South Georgia. This current work, combined with the documentation of twenty years ago, provides an overview of continuity and change in south Georgia traditional culture. The re-tooled exhibition 1) underscored the value of community documentation efforts in preserving heritage, history, culture, and lore not available through other forms of research; 2) illustrated the archival importance of such work in documenting some now-vanished landmarks, traditions, and ways of life; 3) encouraged cross-cultural understanding among diverse community members and help outsiders understand the ways of a local community; 4) drew attention to the rich reservoir of local traditions which creates a sense of place and identity for south Georgians; and

5) highlighted the traditions of long-standing African American and European American communities in the region as well as those of newer or perhaps overlooked communities such as Hispanics.

The new exhibit panels (22" x 28") were developed by curator Dr. Laurie Sommers working in consultation with designer Mr. Fred Sanchez. The new panels used color photographs, thus allowing viewers to distinguish easily between old and new images. The new panels also expanded the geographic scope of the original, drawing examples from throughout Wiregrass Georgia. In addition to new title and credit panels, the exhibit added panels to each of the three main subject areas of the exhibition: Of Farms and Farming, Of Church and Sacred Life, and Of Community, Art, and Life. New panels, using the perspectives offered by the humanities discipline of folklore and folklife, included topics such as the role and traditions of migrant and seasonal agricultural labor, emerging ethnic markets, occupational folklife of turpentine and forest products, syrup making, and continuity and change in traditional music. These new panels broadened the genre and cultural diversity of the entire exhibit.

#### **AUDIENCE EVALUATION AND COMMUNITY IMPACT:**

When the original version of this exhibit was housed in my office, I had a panel that featured tobacco farming leaning against the wall. VSU Physical Plant workers would notice the panel and start talking. I realized that this exhibit has the potential to engage a wide cross section of the South Georgia community since it speaks to a shared experience of many native South Georgians. In Waycross a family (husband, wife, wife's mother) walked slowly through the exhibit. They, too, were particularly taken with the tobacco harvest series: they came up and told me how they used to do this, and how they would carefully arrange the tobacco on the sheets so they looked nice. Beatrice Landrum, who loaned a beekeeping photo of her late husband, brought her two daughters and nephew specially to the opening (see newspaper article enclosed). Other audience members have told me the names of people pictured in the photos that they recognized. In Cordele, a man who was pictured in one of the 1977 photos of the Royal Singing Convention in Mystic, Luther Oakes, Jr., saw the exhibit and contacted me about getting a copy of the photo for him. Word of mouth about the exhibit is continuing; I recently had a request from Joy Jinks in Colquitt to have the exhibit there in 2002.

I realized by observing audience patterns that I would be more successful attracting a broader cross-section of the audience if I placed the exhibit in non-traditional exhibit spaces. The library in Cordele, for example, was a better location than the Lowndes County Historical Museum or the Okefenokee Heritage Center in attracting people who don't normally see exhibits. Accordingly, I wrote an NEA Access grant and was successful in funding plans (currently underway) to make a lightweight free-standing duplicate of the exhibit and tour it to non-traditional exhibit spaces in six small South Georgia communities.

#### **PROJECT GOALS and COMMUNITY IMPACT:**

The re-tooled exhibition was intended to 1) underscore the value of community documentation efforts in preserving heritage, history, culture, and lore not available through other forms of research; 2) illustrate the archival importance of such work in documenting some now-vanished landmarks, traditions, and ways of life; 3) encourage cross-cultural understanding among diverse community members and help outsiders understand the ways of a local community; 4) draw attention to the rich reservoir of local traditions which creates a sense of place and identity for south Georgians; and 5) highlight the traditions of long-standing African American and European American communities in the region as well as those of newer or perhaps overlooked communities such as Hispanics.

Certainly these goals influenced the selection of images for the twelve new panels created for this exhibit.

- I deliberately selected images of Hispanic agricultural workers for the Farming section (a new development in South Georgia since 1977)
- I included an American Indian pow wow hosted by the Cherokee Tribe of Georgia (St. George)
- I expanded the religion section to include Jewish and Catholic traditions (originally the focus was entirely Protestant)
- I included Chinese New Year as part of the community celebrations panel
- I more firmly grounded the exhibit in the wiregrass ecosystem by including an image of wiregrass and longleaf pine in the new introductory panel
- The tradition of tobacco auctions ended in Georgia in 2000, illustrating the importance of both the 1977 and 1997 documentation for archival purposes

Assessment of community impact is anecdotal and subjective; however, it seems clear that people do respond to this exhibit because it is so reflective of lived experience in the region. They also see things in the exhibit of which they were unaware. The local host sites were very appreciative of having a low cost exhibit available and have asked me about any future exhibit plans. This grant made it possible to take the exhibit to these communities at virtually no cost to the local hosts save space and staff time for PR.

A guide for educator's was planned with the original exhibit proposal. The initial plan to use lessons developed by the South Georgia Writing Project 2000 Summer Institute participants did not prove successful. These lessons for the most part did not deal directly with the exhibit, and we did not directly seek out teachers to participate, but rather gave copies of the lesson plan book to the local host organizations. To really engage teachers and students, I felt a more proactive approach was needed. Diane Howard and I thus developed a new set of materials in the fall of 2001: they will be used during the continuation of the exhibit's tour under NEA Access funding. We recently have developed a lesson plan for 4th grade geared to Georgia QCCs which involves writing, a field trip to the exhibit, and local traditions. Response from 4th grade teachers in Fitzgerald this fall was positive (four pods of fourth graders attended over the exhibit a four day period with a pre and post trip activity). Coordinating teacher Marcia Stringer of Ben Hill Elementary wrote in an e-mail to Laurie Sommers (Nov. 10, 2001): "I think some of my students had probably heard the term "folklife" before, but didn't know what it was. They were surprised to learn that they were "knee-deep" in it!!"

\*\*\*NOTE: a hard copy of the educator's material is in the South Georgia Folklife Collection.

## **SUMMARY OF OUTSIDE EVALUTATOR REPORT:**

### **Evaluation of the revived Folklife of Wiregrass Georgia Exhibition**

*Syd Blackmarr, private community arts/tourism consultant*

#### **1. Underscore the value of community documentation efforts in preserving heritage, history, culture and lore not available through other forms of research**

As progressive communities continually seek ways to grow and expand, documentation of the unique heritage and culture (both built and non-material) as exhibited in this show serves as an essential tool to remind the community leadership that these traditions must survive along with newer ones if a community is to maintain its own particular identity and sense of place. The issues are not only folk-life survival, but also community survival and development.

**2. Illustrate the archival importance of such work in documenting some now-vanished landmarks, traditions, and ways of life**

The Wiregrass Exhibit is clear evidence of the importance of this goal, especially the documentation of the Royal Tabernacle in Mystic, GA. Without the documentation of this important tradition and site, there would be extremely limited material on a folk custom that helped to define the musical heritage of rural south Georgia.

**3. Encourage cross-cultural understanding among diverse community members and help outsiders understand the ways of a local community**

The exhibit's broad span of documented traditions had a strong focus on this goal and succeeded perfectly. The traditional musicians who performed at the various sites were particularly important in helping to bridge the gap between various community "strains" as well as 'outside' visitors to the exhibits.

**4. Draw attention to the rich reservoir of local traditions which creates a sense of place and identity for south Georgians**

It was obvious from the excitement and the comments of local visitors to the exhibit that they were reminded and thrilled to see their own precious traditions celebrated in such a meaningful way. The exhibit was also a reminder to community members of the importance of documenting these traditions to guarantee that they are both celebrated and continued.

**5. Highlight the traditions of long-standing African American and European American communities in the region as well as those of newer or perhaps overlooked communities such as Hispanics**

One of the most important and interesting aspects of the exhibit was the new documentation of the Hispanic tradition, "Fiestas Guadalupanas" and the "Ham and Egg Show" tradition from the African American community. Both of these newer areas in the display were excellent educational and awareness tools.

**HUMANITIES PROFESSIONALS:** Folklorist and exhibit curator Dr. Laurie Sommers prepared text and selected photographs for the twelve new panels that were created for this exhibit. Humanities scholars participating in the original exhibit from the late 1980s include folklorists from the original South Central Georgia Folklife Project in 1977 who conducted fieldwork and took photos (Beverly Robinson, David Stanley, Rusty Marshall, Bill Lightfoot, Tom Adler, Alan Jabbour, Carl Fleischhaeur), original curator Dr. Tom Rankin, and original exhibit folklife consultant Annie Archibald. Two native South Georgians reviewed the copy for the updated panels: historian Dr. John Crowley (VSU) and Ms. Syd Blackmarr (who was involved with producing the original version of the exhibit).