

**Folklife of Wiregrass Georgia Access Grant Final Narrative Report
NEA Access Grant 01-5500-4089**

Valdosta State University, South Georgia Folklife Project

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5-15-2001 to 5-31-2003

The grant funded the production of eight lightweight, freestanding kiosks that focus on rural traditional arts associated with agriculture, religion, and community life in a distinctive folk region of the Southeast. Each kiosk has three sides. There is one introductory kiosk on Wiregrass Georgia, two titled "Of Farms and Farming," two titled "Of Religion and Sacred Life," and three titled "Of Community Art in Life." One of the latter also includes the exhibition credits. The photos date from the 1920s to the present and come from such diverse sources as early Okefenokee collector Francis Harper, the American Folklife Center South Central Georgia Folklife Survey(1977, see below), the South Georgia Folklife Project, and other local photographers. Traditional arts and culture presented in these images include quilting, tatting, white oak basketry, woodcarving, tobacco auctions, roadside stands, community festivals, quail hunting plantations, country stores and ethnic markets, local barbecue, comparative bread-making traditions, traditional architecture, the occupational folklife of beekeeping, Hispanic migrant labor, tobacco auctions, and turpentine, cane syrup making, Ham and Egg shows, fish fries and fishing traditions, community murals, fiddling, lined hymns, African American gospel, Sacred Harp singing, river baptisms, fiestas guadalupanas, and bar mitzvahs.

During the first months of funding, this Access grant from NEA facilitated award of a Valdosta State University faculty research grant to conduct research at the Archive of Folk Culture Library of Congress. The purpose of this research was to secure materials from the original 1977 South Central Georgia Folklife Survey, including 8 x 10 photographs for use in the exhibit. Invariably, people in the region have viewed the exhibit, recognizing relatives and neighbors from these 1977 photos. In one case, I was able to help Joyce and Luther Oakes, pictured in a photo from the Mystic Singing Convention, to get copies of this photo for their grandchildren. Although Mystic no longer has its convention, I was able to record the Oakes' at the convention they helped to start, Wesley Chapel, in September of 2001.

This exhibition was developed with an additional grant already in place: during FY 2000-2001 the South Georgia Folklife Project updated an earlier version of this exhibition (previously circulated by the Art's Experiment Station, ABAC, in the late 1980s and based on American Folklife Center fieldwork conducted in 1977) with new photo-text panels which expanded the scope of the original and address the concept of continuity and change in Wiregrass Georgia traditional arts. This version of the exhibit had been traveling to communities with sufficient wall space, primarily to small community galleries, prior to the award activity described in this report. The development of the free-standing version of this exhibit, funded by grant 01-5500-4089, took longer than anticipated, so the early host sites actually used this earlier version of the exhibit but with local arrangements and musician honoraria funded by the NEA Access award. A list of early host sites follows:

- Colony Art Gallery, Fitzgerald, Oct. 11, 2001-Jan. 15, 2002, local host the Fitzgerald Ben Hill Arts Council, with performances by Rutland and Massey (fiddle and guitar)
- Cook County Middle School (local host and site), January 18-February 25, 2002, with the Folkwriting Community Celebration and a Tribute to Local Fiddlers Red Lindsey and John A. Griffen, with performances by Henry Rutland, fiddle, and Paul Massey, guitar
- Museum of Southern Cultures (local host and site), Colquitt, March 9-May 15, 2002, coincided with performances of the folk play Swamp Gravy
- Jimmy Carter Birthplace Visitor Center, Plains, June 1 to November 30, 2002, National Park Service local host

The following sites hosted the free-standing kiosk version of the exhibit:

- Valdosta State University Fine Arts Building (Valdosta), Jan. 6-23, 2003, local host South Georgia Folklife Project and VSU College of the Arts
- Homerville Municipal Complex, Feb. 3-Mar. 3, 2003, City of Homerville and Huxford Genealogical Society, local hosts, with performance by the Flat Top Travelers, bluegrass and old time country
- Roddenberry Memorial Library (Cairo) (site and local host), March 5-April 20, 2003, with performance by South Georgia Grass
- James Earl Carter Library (local host Georgia Southwestern, Americus), April 21-May 9, 2003, coincided with GSW's Springfest, for which the exhibit was the culminating event, including performance by the Freedom Singers of the Albany Civil Rights Movement Museum (African American spirituals and freedom songs)
- Southwest Georgia Regional Library (Bainbridge) (site and local host), May 9-June 25, 2003, performances by Jerry Murkerson Band (bluegrass) and Gayle Grimsley (African American hymn lining)

The primary problem encountered in implementing this project was audience development. The opening receptions were timed where possible to coincide with some other planned event to guarantee an audience. At the last three sites I billed the opening as a "concert" or performance for the featured musicians, and this seemed to help attendance. Placing the exhibit in library entrances and hallways proved to be a good way to ensure exposure to a cross-section of the community. Local gallery spaces usually only attract a small (generally "white") segment of the population.

The exhibit was intended to work with the Folkwriting curriculum (subtitled Lessons on Place, Heritage, and Tradition for the Georgia Classroom), recently developed with a Georgia Humanities Council grant. At Cook Middle School (which had teachers who participated in Folkwriting's development) I had hoped to have more involvement by teachers and students, including Folkwriting and additional activities developed specifically to go with the exhibit. Unfortunately, most teachers at Cook thought the exhibit was too politically correct (because it included images of Mexicans, Jews, Asians, and Native Americans, for example) and refused to have anything to do with it. The positive side of this development was that it inspired a new project to focus on cultural diversity in the region (funded by a new NEA Access grant). I really would have needed another staff person to coordinate with local teachers to use these educational resources more effectively. I plan to have both the exhibit and Folkwriting online in the future, so hopefully these two resources will finally be able to work together as I envisioned. At the Fitzgerald and Americus locations, 4th grade and college students respectively did writing assignments around the exhibit, and the Museum of Southern Cultures in Colquitt adapted their own "word web" activity. At Cook Middle School, the opening coincided with the grand finale of the Folkwriting Project, with exhibits and reading of student work and a youth fair.

In terms of impact on the organization, this exhibition helped the SGFP better reach an underserved rural population of the general public, and to a lesser extent educators and students, and complemented VSU's ongoing efforts in outreach and cultural enrichment for the region. It provided increased visibility for the SGFP and Valdosta State in the host communities and has established some new partners and collaborators. The host communities, especially local libraries, have been very pleased to have a free, high quality exhibition available that deals with local culture. Based on this interest, the tour schedule was changed from the original grant outline to include more libraries as hosts. Americus, Colquitt, and Bainbridge were added to the tour roster due to word of mouth. Local newspapers have been very cooperative with coverage. The exhibit is continuing to tour after the end of the grant period.

Comments about the exhibit:

"An exhibit that gives one a sense of time and place to the culture and traditions of the area...an innovative project" Bob Hornbuckle, Valdosta Magazine, Summer 2003

"Being a public library in a small rural community carries an added responsibility of providing quality cultural enrichment for the residents. Thank you for helping us achieve that goal by making this outstanding collection of photographs available to the people of southwest Georgia." Susan Ralph, Southwest GA Regional Library, Bainbridge, May 20, 2003

On the Tribute to Cook County Fiddlers, Jan. 26, 2002 "I thought it was very fitting,' Sarah Lindsey said. As the granddaughter to the late Red Lindsey, who was inducted in to the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame in late November, she remembers a great man who was a great fiddler. 'I think it's good that they're honoring the old ways that are being forgotten.'" In Valdosta Daily Times, 1-28-02

Benefit of Arts Endowment Support

The major benefit of this award was to enable the SGFP to make a quality exhibit available at virtually no cost to small communities which do not have traditional exhibit spaces. It truly was an “access” grant. The target audiences here were those who might not normally seek out or feel comfortable in formal galleries, which even in small communities tend to be associated with the cultural establishment of a certain race and/or class. This approach to disseminating the exhibit, for example, considerably increased the minority access to the project, as compared with a tour of an earlier version of this exhibit (with GA Humanities Council funding) to a local historical society, community gallery, and heritage center. The assumption behind placing the exhibit in public spaces (such as the Homerville Municipal Complex and community libraries) is that a percentage of people walking by will view some portion of the exhibit. Further, local small town newspapers are far more likely to give coverage to an exhibition of this kind than in larger cities. The numbers of audience members (individuals benefiting) is larger than I anticipated due to the run at the Jimmy Carter NHS in Plains, which has high visitation, and the coupling with the popular “Georgia folklife play” Swamp Gravy in Colquitt.