Public Folklore Collections in the Upper Midwest poster

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Public folklorists have generated a wealth of ethnographic documentation since the 1970s through thousands of folk arts and folklife projects. Funded from the commons, they have depended on the “commons wealth” of traditional artists and communities, and emphasized, for the common good, subsequent public productions. Digital age techniques afford ways to enhance the public investment in this work and renew common access to these documentary resources. Folklorists in the Upper Midwest have used these tools to identify and locate public folklore collections, and join with colleagues, archivists, and artists to record project histories, catalog materials, and enliven preservation issues.

Access to Prior Folk Arts Projects ~ 2002-2004

The “Access to Prior Folk Arts Projects in the Upper Midwest” project, funded by NEA, identified 50 publicly-funded folk arts projects in Wisconsin and border areas that had resulted in significant caches of survey documentation. To reunite project materials scattered over several formal and informal repositories, and record project histories that have largely remained oral, CSUMC staff adapted an American Folk Life Center collection description format and prepared collection guides for a dozen project collections. The University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Digital Collection Center now posts these guides online at Archival Resources in Wisconsin: Descriptive Finding Aids, http://digcoll.library.wisc.edu/1711.9w/archives/csunc.html

By Fall 2007, the “Public Folk Arts and Folklife Collections of the Upper Midwest” online resource included:
1. German-American Music Project Collection
2. Goose Island Ramblers Documentation Project Collection
3. Hocking Village Artisan Traditions Collection
4. Jo Daviess County Folk Arts in Education Project Collection
5. Legends of the Supernatural in Southwestern Wisconsin Project Collection
6. Minnesota Folks Project Collection
7. Robert Andrews Collection
8. Rossmailing in the Upper Midwest Collection
9. Summer Field School 2002 Collection

Survey of Public folklore Collections ~ 2005-2006

NHPHC

The “Survey of Public Folklore Collections in the Upper Midwest” project expanded the identification of projects in Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, and Michigan’s western Upper Peninsula, with NHPHC’ support. Staff identified c. 350 NEA grants, awarded to c. 91 organizations, but not all had generated ethnographic documentation. The region’s folklorists helped staff select c. 50 key collections at 14 sites to visit and describe. The report, Survey of Public Folklore Collections in the Upper Midwest (2005-2006), is posted at http://csunc.wisc.edu/nhpchc/2005-2006.

Public Folklore Archivist for the Upper Midwest

CSUMC continued to employ a professional archivist and assistants, with NEA infrastructure support. They worked with staff to prepare over a dozen more collection guides. The 10 now posted at the “Public Folk Arts and Folklife Collections of the Upper Midwest” website are:
1. East Central and Southeastern Illinois Folk Arts Surveys Collection
2. Ethic Music in Northern Wisconsin and Michigan Collection
3. Iowa Arts Council Folk Arts Program Records
4. Leonard Finich Collection
5. New Glarus Swiss Festivals Collection
6. River Harvest Project Collection (Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin)
7. West Central Illinois Back Door Carving Survey (Gregory Hansen) Collection and Schuyler Arts Folk Music Project Collection
8. Wisconsin Swiss Traditional Music Project Collection
9. Wisconsin Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program Collection
10. Woodward Indian Traditional Art Project Collection (Wisconsin, Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, Iowa, Minnesota)

Using Archival Tools & Technology to Organize Collections

Of the five major archival functions—appraisal, arrangement and description, outreach, preservation, and reference—possibly the most important is arrangement and description. Yet folklore fieldwork, records holders often lack the means to provide adequate public access through inventories, finding aids, or staff. CSUMC staff conducted site visits and interviews with collection holders to develop a collection guide modeled after American Folk Life Center finding aids. The guides provide access points based on controlled vocabulary taken from Library of Congress Subject Headings and the Ethnographic Thesaurus. The guides are part of a large Wisconsin finding aids collection and are encoded using Encoded Archival Description to enhance searching and retrieval.