

A Brief History of the National Folk Festival

“We in the United States are amazingly rich in the elements from which to weave a culture. We have the best of man’s past upon which to draw brought to us by our native folk and the folk from all parts of the world. In binding these elements into a national fabric of beauty and strength, let us see to it that the fineness of each shows in the completed handiwork.”

Franklin D. Roosevelt, in a letter to Paul Green, President of the National Folk Festival Association, 1938 (Reprinted in the 7th National Folk Festival Program, 1940)

The Early Years

First held in 1934, the National Folk Festival is the oldest multicultural celebration of traditional arts in the country and the event that defined this form of presentation. It employed the first field-worker (Vance Randolph), created the talk/demonstration workshop, put the first craft demonstrations at festivals, mixed religious and secular presentations, and used scholars as presenters. But its most radical and enduring innovation was that of putting the arts of many nations, races and languages into the same event on an equal footing. The term “folk festival” had been used before the National Folk Festival was created, but it was used for monocultural events. With the National, this term acquired a new and inclusive definition.

The festival’s founder was Sarah Gertrude Knott, who created the National Folk Festival Association in 1933. Those who joined her as fieldworkers and presenters in the first festivals were also major figures in the creation of academic and applied folklore: Ben Botkin, Zora Neale Hurston, Constance Roarke, George Pullen Jackson, Arthur Campa, George Korson, Richard Dorson, J. Frank Dobie, Lauren Post and Bascom Lunsford, among others.

Some of the artists presented at the first festival are now legendary, and the recordings and other documentation made possible by the National are national treasures. Among those artists were: Horton Barker, Captain Richard Maitland, Texas Gladden, Hobart Smith, The Red Headed Fiddlers, Captain Pearl Nye, Bill Henseley and Lawrence Walker. Zora Neale Hurston brought blues and black shape-note singers to the National from Eatonville, Florida, marking the first time these art forms were performed at a folk festival. It was the first event of national stature to present the blues, Cajun music, a polka band, a Tex-Mex *conjunto*, a Sacred Harp ensemble, Peking opera – the list goes on and on.

“A comparison of accordions and accordion technique by German, Polish, and Louisiana French players was actually quite stimulating,” intoned the *Chicago Tribune* in a 1937 festival review.

Leota Ware was a child when she came to the 1936 National in Dallas with the Kiowa Indian Dancers. “All these people of different colors and different talk were sitting in the dining hall having supper when we got there,” she recalls. “Texas and Oklahoma were segregated then and I’d not seen black people and white people and Indians eating together. It made a big impression on me and I talked about it when I got home. I told my grandmother and she said ‘Heaven will be like that.’”

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Eleanor Roosevelt was involved in the National's move to Washington, D.C. in 1938 when the festival settled in for a five-year stay (1938-42). She served as the National's Honorary Chair in 1938, and attended several festivals. In 1976 Miss Knott recalled: "... we were associated with the New Deal, an interest of the First Lady, one of many causes she supported. The times were difficult, but exciting. We knew this new work was changing the way the nation saw itself, that some of the smaller pieces of the national puzzle were being viewed with appreciation for the first time. I couldn't wait to get to work in the morning."

The festival was presented in Constitution Hall, which was owned and operated by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) and at that time rigidly segregated. It was here in 1939 that celebrated opera singer Marian Anderson was famously denied the stage, an incident that prompted Eleanor Roosevelt to relinquish her membership in the DAR.

Yet it was here just the year before at the 1938 National that W. C. Handy, known as the "Father of the Blues," made his first appearance on an integrated stage. The festival presented black and white performers on the same stage every year – and got away with it. How the festival managed this remains unclear to this day, but its organizers seem to have simply ignored the prohibition and the DAR never challenged them on it.

The 1942 National was held in New York City and an emphasis was placed on Jewish folk arts. Performers who had recently escaped the Holocaust in Europe were presented.

The Post-war Period

The National continued to move among American cities during the post-World War II period, but it was held most often in St. Louis, where it had begun. It also began a slow decline. Miss Knott held to the formulas that had made the National successful in the 1930s, but it was no longer the sole folk event held on a national scale. The folksong revival was in its ascendancy, and its leaders had not been involved with the National. The National's decline continued during the heyday of the revival in the 1960s.

In 1969, two employees of the Department of the Interior became involved with the financially troubled National. They engineered an agreement with the National Park Service, whereby the National Folk Festival Association would assist the National Park system with cultural programming in exchange for an annual stipend. As part of the agreement, the 33rd National Folk Festival was presented in the then new Wolf Trap Farm Park. Located in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C., it was the first national park devoted to the performing arts. This marked the beginning of the National's 11-year run at Wolf Trap.

In the 1970s, the combination of folklorists, collectors and folksong revival musicians that came to the Board of the National Folk Festival Association gradually transformed the organization and broadened the scope of its activities. In 1976 Joseph T. Wilson became the executive director of the association and a new era began. Wilson and the board of directors changed the name to the National Council for the Traditional Arts, to reflect the expanded mission of the organization.

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In these years the National became known for the ability of its Board and other volunteers to find and present the folk virtuoso. Many board members were folklorists, cultural anthropologists and ethnomusicologists highly skilled in fieldwork and in touch with others working in communities in many areas of the nation. A totally new program was presented every year. The National's example was influential, and served as an inspiration and model for traditional arts festivals across the nation.

In 1983, after 11 years at Wolf Trap, the National Folk Festival took to the road again. That the NCTA developed the multi-ethnic festival in the 1930s is well known in our field. Its reinvention of the folk festival in the late 1980s as a joint effort by local communities and the NCTA is not as well known, but far more germane to our time. Today, National Folk Festival is attracting the largest audiences in its history.