

STATE OF THE FOLK ARTS IN ARKANSAS

2021 NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND SURVEY REPORT



**State of the Folk Arts in Arkansas:
A Report of a Folk Arts Survey of Arkansas**
January - June, 2021

Survey and Report By



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MID-AMERICA ARTS ALLIANCE

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Process and Goals

Arkansas Folk and Traditional Arts (AFTA) is a folk arts program serving the state of Arkansas and housed within the University of Arkansas Libraries Special Collections Division. AFTA worked with Mid-America Arts Alliance (M-AAA) to conduct a survey of folk and traditional arts practices currently happening in the state and to learn the needs of artists and organizations supporting folk arts. This survey was completed between February and June of 2021.

During this period, M-AAA formed a network among folk arts leaders in their region (Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Texas) who were working on this regional project during the same period as AFTA. M-AAA contributed to the funding for independent researchers to conduct the surveys. These researchers were hired by the individual participating organizations/agencies in each state. Each state created separate goals specific to their needs for this project but shared their process in digital meetings over the 5-month period. The independent researchers created reports and other documents for use at the organizational level and shared their findings with M-AAA and the network of folk arts programs participating in this project.

Arkansas Folk and Traditional Arts' main goals with this project were to better understand the traditions practiced throughout Arkansas, especially outside of the well-documented Ozarks, and to ensure future projects and funding reach Arkansas' underrepresented and underserved populations. As a relatively new program, AFTA also hoped to learn ways to develop future programming that best fits the needs of individual and organization partners across the state. AFTA frequently partners with organizations and individual tradition-bearers and hopes to use this report to grow that network. Finally, AFTA is interested in gathering information about the training and financial needs of folk artists and folk arts organizations in Arkansas in order to sustain folk and traditional arts practices.

To begin the survey, I spoke with a local folklorist, Dr. Gregory Hansen of Arkansas State University, to get some ideas about who I might contact to begin the survey process and best practices for this type of project. I also spoke at length with AFTA's coordinator, Virginia Siegel. Virginia and I worked together to form a list of guiding questions to ask of organizations and of individuals. I began to reach out to various organizations and individuals through email, social media, and phone in January and continued to conduct interviews through May. I also created a survey using Google Forms which was posted on AFTA's website and on social media.

I conducted most of my interviews through Zoom, completed a few over the phone, and I visited with one organizational director in person. I used the guiding questions to have

open-ended conversations with organizational leaders and artists to find out about the work they have done in the past, what they are doing now, and the ways they feel a folk arts program in Arkansas can help them meet their goals.

Project page: <https://folklife.uark.edu/2021survey/>

Folk and Traditional Arts Programming and Event Planning in Arkansas

Individual artists, folk arts organizations, art councils, and museums across Arkansas are interacting with folk and traditional arts in a myriad of ways. Many organizations have staff and/or volunteers dedicated to sharing knowledge and forming community around arts, crafts, and the preservation of community history and folkways. Some artists are working in and leading organizations to help continue arts education and programming in Arkansas, and some organizations are led by motivated individuals looking to preserve and document their history and culture.

As with other sectors, the pandemic has had an impact on folk arts organizations, folk artists, and tradition-bearers in Arkansas. In speaking to people across the state, I listened to them explain the ways the pandemic changed their work. Many organizations are working to move content online and are trying more than ever to reach audiences through social media and other means. Organizational leaders, volunteers, and artists are all looking forward to meeting in person during the summer of 2021 and beyond and planning events to bring people into their spaces and webpages.

In Blytheville, the Delta Gateway Museum now features a sharecropper house built using methods from vernacular architecture popular 100 years ago. Leslie Hester is using objects in her museum collection to outfit the house and yard and tell the story of daily life in the northern Arkansas Delta. In Batesville, a town located at the southwestern end of the Ozark region on the White River, Carly Dahl has been offering craft kits for adults and art kits for kids on a monthly basis at Batesville Area Arts Council, and she is looking forward to hosting outdoor events with Main Street Batesville in coming months, such as the Artober Festival that happens each October in downtown Batesville. In Helena-West Helena, the leaders of the Delta Cultural Center are creating online content about local buildings and places, offering demonstrations and lifestyle workshops. They also asked local kids to write essays about their experiences in their own backyards, and were happy to have many kids participate, according to their Education Coordinator Richard Spillman. In Dardanelle, Meredith Martin-Moats has been able to start up weekly garden nights at the McElroy House where local community members come to learn gardening skills, spend time outdoors, and some also practice English and Spanish skills during these outdoor meetings; at the McElroy House, they are looking forward to hosting craft nights again and hope to start their discussion series simply called “Living Room Conversations” back up again soon.

In Arkansas, as is true for many places, folk and traditional arts hubs are places where people can find community in difficult times and bond through memories and “granny skills” as they call folk arts at the McElroy House. Others call folk arts and their preservation efforts work in “living history” as they do at the Eddie Mae Herron Center

in Pocahontas where I celebrated Juneteenth with Pat Johnson and others from the area at the local museum and community center dedicated to furthering respect for and the history of local African American communities.

The interviews I conducted focused on the work that organizations and artists are currently doing and have done successfully in the past, the ways that they define folk and traditional arts, the ways they interact with the local community, the needs of organizations and artists, and their future plans. Each of my conversations are detailed in my field notes which are attached to this report. Tradition-bearers, folk artists, art and folk art organizations, and museums in Arkansas are focused on providing entertaining and informative programming for their clients and supporters. I spoke with many who are focused on music, foodways, and fabric crafts; these three areas may seem disconnected on the surface, but they are all aspects of daily life in the past and present in the rural South and beyond, each being engaged with home life and events in the community. There are other types of folk arts practiced in Arkansas, but my interviews indicate that these three areas are popular; this shows that in Arkansas the focus presently for many people is daily life. This history of day-to-day life in the past is intriguing, and many people in the state are engaged in thinking about the traditions, foods, and music of the past and are finding new ways to engage with the past through crafts, hobbies, food, and music in their daily lives.

Many artists and organizations work with public schools to bring K-12 programming or make it accessible to local students. For some organizations, this is something they can provide easily while others need support with providing adequate programming. Most organizations want to work with local school districts, and many artists also create work with children and public schools in mind. Others need help drawing audiences of young adults, realizing that social media and online content is a key to success in this area.

Almost all the participants of this survey explained that they are working to put content online for audiences, and although the state has lifted all pandemic restrictions, most are still planning to continue building a fuller online presence.

Planning Needs and Future Goals

There are multiple areas of need and specific requests from each organization and artist I spoke with, but there are five main areas of support that were mentioned in speaking with organizations and artists about their needs and plans for the future: programming to seek new audiences or grow current ones, hosting and documenting demonstrations and workshops both online and offline, participation in a network or registry, community building and community activism, and traveling or shared exhibits on folk arts and Arkansas culture and history.

Programming Needs

The first need mentioned by many that I spoke with was the need to grow current audiences through participation in online events and in-person programming. Many of the organizations I spoke with are currently working with and would like to continue working with local school districts. Many asked for assistance with planning programming for K-12 students, especially older students, and many also want to grow this part of their audience, hoping to engage more with local schools. Folk artists and tradition-bearers also want to connect with young audiences in some ways, but K-12 programming and outreach is mostly sought by organizations.

Others are hoping to maintain their connection with K-12 groups but need to see growth in adult audiences, especially among adults under age 50. This need goes hand in hand with connecting to K-12 students because both goals involve an increased presence online through personal websites and social media. Many small organizations and folk artists are unsure of best practices for using social media and requested help in this area. In some cases, this might mean offering training on the best times to make posts on social media, what type of materials do well (for instance, pictures work well to drive post interaction up but videos that aren't embedded don't draw clicks). In other cases, this support means funding for equipment like webcams, microphones, lights, and selfie-sticks or the ability to hire a new staff member or advertise the need for active online volunteers. Some organizations are brainstorming ways to interact with people online while others need help understanding the basics.

Workshops and Demonstrations

Many artists and organizational leaders in Arkansas have ideas for programming but need help with funding and with bringing these ideas to online audiences. Social media is pushing more and more content online, and many artists and organizations need help with creating video content for use online. Ozark Traditional Arts leader and folk artist Allison Williams would like to host demonstrations on crafts like spoon-making but needs equipment to document the demonstrations and space to host the events, and many others are in similar situations, especially with regard to documenting events and

putting content online. As mentioned above, many organizations need help with funding for new equipment to use for making and editing videos. They also need training on planning video content, editing video content, and posting video content. Others have asked for assistance with documenting events they host annually like the hog butchering done each year at the Eddie Mae Herron Center in Pocahontas.

For many, support for workshops and demonstrations comes through funding. For them, this doesn't include hosting a new event or offering a special program; instead, it indicates their need for funding for supplies. The Parker Homestead hosts programming currently for local schools but operates these demonstrations at a loss. They need supplies for any demonstration offered from broom-making to lye soap to sorghum. The Parker Homestead also uses old equipment offsite to produce cornmeal and sorghum molasses and needs funding to repair and maintain their equipment. Many organizations share similar needs for funding for things like equipment and upkeep that are not always provided through traditional grant sources.

Network of Artists and Organizations

Many organizational leaders are interested in networking with other organizations and artists across the state. For them this means sharing events online through social media, having others to discuss ideas for programming and fundraising, discussing grant opportunities and best practices, and other topics. Many want to network with others but are looking for a serious network, something more than only a Facebook group or email list; those means of connecting are fine but organizational leaders want to see conversation and events in those spaces, not only links to articles or events. This shows that artists and organizational leaders are looking to build a community throughout the state to help each other and learn new ideas and skills together. Many artists and organizational leaders requested a registry of tradition-bearers and folk artists who would like to be contacted for demonstrations, performances, and workshops.

Community Activism and Community Building

Many community leaders see folk and traditional arts as a way to bring people together in local communities. The work of leading a folk arts organization, local history center or museum, or working as a folk artist is work that is connected to community activism. The people pursuing these careers and lifestyles are passionate about the work they do and want to connect with others in their communities, seeing everyone as having something to contribute to the greater good of their local group, town, or region. Many people across the state are looking to connect with other community activists to work together on projects that bring people together. Foodways are a particularly good way to foster this type of growth. The McElroy House in Dardanelle is a particularly good example of the ways that communities can form around a folk arts organization. Many

leaders and artists want to see these communities grow and would like support for the work they are doing toward these efforts.

Traveling Exhibits

A few leaders of small museums requested assistance with offering new exhibits, citing their inability to create new exhibits as a possible reason they are not reaching local audiences on a regular basis. Leslie Hester mentioned the Delta Gateway Museum's need for new exhibits and explained that traveling exhibits available locally come at a large cost. She requests free traveling exhibits for her museum and others across the state that deal with arts, history, heritage, and culture of the region and state. For Blytheville, an underserved population, this means that arts, including folk arts, are not available for consumption locally and therefore go unseen and unknown for many in the area. She hopes that a traveling exhibit will be created in the future, and we also discussed the possibility of using a bus or other secure means of transportation to allow museums and organizations across the state to share exhibits free of charge. She feels that many museums would be willing to participate and would benefit from this sort of effort. Though other leaders were not as specific as Ms. Hester, many did mention the need for new content that requires less cost and planning than hosting new events or creating a new program to reignite local interest in the organization.

Conclusion

Arkansas is home to a large number of folk artists, tradition-bearers, and organizations dedicated to supporting folk artists and art. These community leaders are creating vitally important programming and passing on important history and culture to younger generations. Many of these organizational leaders see the work they are doing as community activism and hope to continue to connect with local community members to build long-lasting, meaningful relationships. These leaders are hopeful that the long pause during the pandemic will help grow their networks and allow them to reach new audiences, especially locally.

These organizations and artists need: support for programming needs, workshops and demonstrations, networking with other leaders and artists, support for community activism work, and access to a variety of folk art exhibits at no cost to their organizations.

The leaders of folk arts organizations, tradition-bearers, and folk artists in Arkansas are passionate about the work they do, and they want to continue their work. In completing this survey, I was able to begin building a network of contacts and future relationships with AFTA, but I have only provided a glimpse of the work being done in these areas across the state. AFTA considers folk and traditional art to be rooted in communities, learned in communities, new and emerging, and diverse yet universal, so there are many more organizations and artists to connect with in the future. AFTA plans to continue to grow their network by continuing to contact folk arts organizations and tradition-bearers in Arkansas during the next year to learn more about the state of folk arts in Arkansas and to continue to grow their network. AFTA hopes to continue to diversify the image of folk art in Arkansas and to continue to include folk and traditional art from underdocumented and underserved populations and communities in their programming and outreach efforts. As I continue to help AFTA grow their network, I plan to reach out to new organizations and artists from each county in Arkansas during the next year to be sure AFTA has contacts all over the state of Arkansas. Please contact me via email at willette@uark.edu if you would like to talk about the work of a tradition bearer, folk artist, or an organization that supports folk arts.

Appendix A

List of Interviews (chronological order):

- Dr. Adam Long, Director of Heritage Sites at A-State in Jonesboro
- Shannon Williams, Director of Hemingway-Pfeiffer Museum and Educational Center in Piggott
- Ruth O’Loughlin, Director of Lakeport Plantation in Lake Village
- Penny Toombs, Director of Historic Dyess Colony: Johnny Cash Boyhood Home in Dyess and Southern Tenant Farmers Museum in Tyronza
- Amber Perrodin, Director of Ozark Story Project in Springdale
- Betty Beazely, Treasurer of Caring Touch Quilters and Leader/Member of Ties that Bind from Forrest City
- Carly Dahl, Director of Batesville Area Arts Council in Batesville
- Meredith Martin-Moates, Director and Founder of McElroy House in Dardanelle
- Leslie Hester, Director of Delta Gateway Museum in Blytheville
- Traci Rae Manos, Musician and Poet from Fayetteville area
- Kelly and Donna Mulhollen, Musicians/Poets – members of Still on the Hill of Fayetteville
- Richard Spillman, Educational Coordinator at Delta Cultural Center in Helena-West Helena
- Cyrus Parker, Owner/Operator of Parker Homestead in Harrisburg
- Allison Williams, Musician, Caller, Director/Founder of Ozark Traditional Arts in Fayetteville
- Pat Johnson, Director of Eddie Mae Herron Museum and Center in Pocahontas



ARKANSAS FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS

A new statewide public folklore program of the University of Arkansas Libraries dedicated to building cross-cultural understanding by documenting, presenting, and sustaining Arkansas' living traditional arts and cultural heritage.

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