

# The Founding of the New Jersey Folk Festival

by Angus Kress Gillespie

I first came to Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, in the fall of 1973 as an instructor in the American Studies Department. It was a tiny department with two professors. One was a specialist in literature and popular culture; the other, a specialist in the social sciences and women's studies. I was the third professor ever hired, to round things out with a background in folklore and material culture. When I got started at Rutgers, I had the idea in the back of my mind that someday I might like to start a folk festival because my mentor in graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania, Don Yoder, was a big advocate of folk festivals. Yoder was one of the founders of the Kutztown Folk Festival back in 1947. But I figured that starting up a folk festival would have to wait for long time, perhaps many years, because my research agenda would have to take precedence, given the pressure to "publish or perish." Little did I know that an opportunity to create a folk festival would soon present itself.

At that time, American Studies was part of Douglass College, a separate college for women within Rutgers. Douglass had its own faculty and its own curriculum. The Dean of Douglass College was Marjorie Somers Foster. The department of higher education for the State of New Jersey had decided that Douglass College was to become the magnet college for the arts. As a result, there was an exciting development at Douglass--the completion of a magnificent new four-part arts complex, built astride a large ravine leading to the Raritan River. On one side of the ravine, they built a theater and a music rehearsal hall. On the other side of the ravine, there was a building for the study of art history, plus a building for studio art. Spanning the ravine and

connecting the four buildings of the two sides was a pedestrian bridge, affording a dramatic view of the ravine below.

Understandably proud of the new multi-million dollar arts complex, Dean Foster declared the academic year 1973-1974, "The Year of the Arts," and she set up a committee that fall to come up with appropriate activities. As a result, the English Department came up with a series of poetry readings; Theater developed a series of plays; Dance planned a series of performances; Music hosted a number of recitals; and Art proposed a number of exhibitions. Although I was very new to the college, I went to the Dean and complained.

"How can you have a Year of the Arts and leave out the American Studies Department? After all, as you know, we are heavily involved in the arts," I said.

"Well," she replied, "if you feel that strongly about it, I shall appointment you to the committee."

At the very next meeting of the committee, I told the other members that they could not really have a "Year of the Arts" without a folk festival. To my surprise, the proposal met with almost no opposition.

"Well, if you feel that strongly about it," said the chair, "go ahead and plan a folk festival. By the way, you can have a budget of \$1300."

I was very pleased with the outcome, and \$1300 sounded like a lot of money at the time, though I was not quite sure how to proceed. A few days later, one of the junior deans at Douglass College, took me aside.

"Look," the dean said, "you can take that \$1300 and blow it on a one-shot folk festival, but what I advise you to do is to plan ahead. For the first year at least, try to get the musicians to donate their services. Then take the money and invest it in T-shirts, hot dogs, and beer. You can

sell that stuff for a profit. Then take the proceeds and put it in the bank. That way, you can create a revolving fund, continue the festival on an annual basis, and eventually you may even be able to pay the musicians a small honorarium.” The dean went on to explain that this seed money was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It immediately became clear that, if the proposed folk festival were to survive beyond the first year, it would have to be a hybrid, a kind of mixture of the public and private sectors. Though the event would take place on the campus, be managed by faculty, and be run by students, it would have to generate enough revenue on its own to pay for the programming content—the singers, the dancer, the musicians, the storytellers, and the crafts demonstrators.

We took this advice to heart, and we began to implement the dean’s plan. We ordered a number of T-shirts. In choosing a logo for the shirts, we turned to the folk art collection of the Newark Museum at 49 Washington Street in the heart of the downtown arts district of Newark, New Jersey. There we found a cock weathervane made of copper in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in rural New Jersey. We felt that this rooster was a fine symbol of the folk culture found in New Jersey in the earlier days. We were pleased with the fine sweep of the tail feathers and the erect posture of the rooster. T-shirts were popular collectibles in those days, and they sold well. Another advantage was that they were not perishable. Those that were not sold could be held over the next event.

We ordered a suitable number of hot dogs, along with the rolls and the condiments. We also had to plan on purchasing the necessary warming trays, serving implements, and paper holders for the hot dogs. Cooking the hot dogs with outdoor camping stoves was difficult. We did not have professional, heavy-duty cooking equipment. We often had to battle wind and rain to keep the flames going. It was very hard work.

It soon became apparent that the most profitable item was to be the sale of beer. In those days, the legal drinking age was eighteen in New Jersey, so our potential market included nearly all of the students at Rutgers. We were fortunate that the law in New Jersey made things easy for us. Because northern New Jersey was densely populated with numerous Roman Catholic ethnic churches, the state legislature had made it easy for any legitimate nonprofit organization to obtain a one-day "Picnic Permit" for the sale of beer. All you had to do was to fill out a simple one-page form and send it, along with a \$25 check, to the state capital in Trenton. By return mail, you would get your one-day permit.

Armed with the permit number, we could approach our local beer distributor, and they would take care of nearly everything. The distributor drove up with a refrigerated truck on festival day. Inside the truck were numerous kegs of beer and a few kegs of non-alcoholic root beer. On the side of the truck were the spigots. We had an agreement with the distributor. We would buy the beer and soda, on consignment, by the keg. This meant that we only had to pay for the kegs actually consumed, after we had sold it.

There were long lines of people waiting to buy beer, so we had to set up some temporary fencing to provide for orderly lines for our patrons. We also had to set up a table to check identification, to make sure that the buyers were eighteen years of age. We would then ink stamp the back of their hands so that we only had to check ID's once. The whole thing was amazingly profitable. We sold a 16-ounce "large" cup of beer for one dollar, and we sold a 20-ounce "jumbo" cup for two dollars. Clearly the 16-ounce cup was a better deal, but most patrons opted for the larger cup because it appeared so much larger, and it was more convenient, saving a return trip to the line. The whole thing was amazingly profitable. It's almost impossible not to make money when you are buying beer by the keg and selling it by the cup.

So we had a business plan. The idea was to take this small amount of capital and to create a perpetual self-financing festival. Next we had to come up with a date and a place. Fortunately, these were easy decisions. We decided early on to put off the date of the actual festival for as long as possible, in order to give ourselves the maximum amount of time for planning. Yet we had to squeeze the festival into the spring calendar before the students left for summer vacation. We wanted the festival to take place at the very end of the spring semester, the weekend just after classes had ended and just before exams were to begin. So, the festival was set for the last Saturday in April. As luck would have it, this was a fortunate choice because that date precisely coincided with a well-established spring event on neighboring campus—namely, the Agricultural Field Day at the nearby college of agriculture, an event which routinely brings thousands of their alumni to town. It turned out that many of the agricultural college people would wander over to the folk festival during the day (and vice versa) to the benefit of both events.

Selecting the site for the New Jersey Folk Festival was quite easy and straightforward. As it happens, the centerpiece of the Douglass Campus is a 19<sup>th</sup> century estate and grounds known as Wood Lawn. The mansion was built in 1830 by Colonel James Neilson (1784-18620, a member of the third generation of a prosperous New Brunswick family. Neilson originally established Wood Lawn as a gentleman's farm—complete with stables, a caretaker's house, and a gatehouse. Neilson was a trustee of Rutgers, and upon his death Wood Lawn was left to Rutgers University. The mansion has a commanding presence on the Douglass Campus. It stands at the top of a hill, and from the front porch there is a commanding view of a large, open three-acre lawn, which slopes gradually toward the nearby Raritan River. There was never any question about the fact that Wood Lawn was the ideal site for a folk festival. The only limitation

of that site was that it was very large and unfenced, crisscrossed with campus footpaths from all directions. There was no way realistically to control access to the site. So early on we decided not to charge admission to our festival. We would advertise “free admission,” and hope that large numbers of people would attend, patronize our vendors, and purchase our T-shirts, hot dogs, and beer.

So we had a business plan, along with the date and the site. Next, we had to put together a staff. I realized that I would need help. In the first place, the project was simply too big to carry out all by myself. And besides, I was new to the region of central New Jersey. I had done no folklore fieldwork in the area, and I had almost no local contacts. There was no money to pay a staff, so we had to find a way around this problem. The answer came in a flash. We could “hire” a couple of undergraduate students by granting independent study credits. There was a rubric in the catalog called “Special Problems in American Culture, 4 Credits.” So our special problem was putting on a folk festival. I had no particular feminist agenda at the time, but I knew I needed help, and I was teaching at a women’s college. Two students immediately came to mind. They were both amazingly talented women, each of whom brought precisely the kind of knowledge and experience that was needed to make the festival a success.

The first was Barbara Irwin, from nearby Franklin Township in Somerset County, who had considerable experience in organizing community-based shows for hobby crafters, so she was given the title of crafts coordinator. The idea was to recruit local craftspeople to display their work and offer it for sale. We would charge a small booth fee which would go towards the folk festival fund. Craftspeople submitted their work to a jury consisting of critics, arts educators, and skilled artisans. The jury would grant space only to those entries meeting a standard of excellence. The premise was that the folk arts and crafts, no less than fine arts,

should possess traditions of workmanship and beauty. From a large number of applicants, we were able to select about 25 crafters, who displayed such things as hammered silver jewelry, carved chests, hand-thrown earthenware jugs, pieced quilts, and macramé hangings. We charged ten dollars for each booth space, though the crafters had to provide their own tents, tables, and chairs. The day before the festival, Barbara and I went out to the field in front of Wood Lawn, and marked off ten-foot spaces perpendicular to the path which descended from the mansion to the foot of the hill. We marked off the spaces using bags of lime, which created nice white stripes showing up clearly against the green background of the lawn.

Early on, we also decided to recruit a number of food vendors to supplement our own offerings of beer and hot dogs. We were able to recruit ten food vendors. We tried to recruit a variety of food offerings, but we did not allow anyone else to sell beer or hot dogs. We set them up along another footpath, along the boundary of the field, and we marked off twenty-foot spaces with bags of lime. We charged thirty dollars for each booth space. A couple of vendors sold American fast food items such as hamburgers, French fries, corn on the cob, and ice cream. In addition, we were pleased to recruit some ethnic food vendors including Armenian, Chinese, and Asian Indian.

The second student on our staff was Kathy DeAngelo, a musician herself, who had been following the folk scene for her whole life. She was given the title of music coordinator, and she single-handedly recruited the musicians, the singers, and the dancers. Kathy had been doing folklore fieldwork for several years on her own without any professional supervision. She was simply passionate about the music. So, when it came time to select musicians for the folk festival, Kathy already had any number of suitable performers already in mind. Very early in the process of musician selection, Kathy and I decided that the folk festival would present a mix of

traditional musicians and folk revivalists. We tried to pick examples of the best of both categories.

On the traditional side, our headliner was Ed McDermott, an Irish fiddler, whom Kathy had come to know quite well. McDermott was born on April 2, 1896, in Corrawallen, County Leitrim, Ireland. His father was the local constable and a fiddler, from whom Ed learned to play. As a young man, Ed began performing at local parish dances. But he unwillingly left the country on the run in 1915 because of the local political turmoil. Ed landed in New York where he fit in with the Irish community, playing in celi bands and dances. Sometime in the 1940s, Ed gave up playing the fiddle, and he moved to Monmouth County, New Jersey. Many years later in the 1970s, Dr. Richard Levine, a local dentist and folk music aficionado, “discovered” Ed and got him back into playing. Kathy DeAngelo first met the 75 year old Ed McDermott at a house party hosted by Dr. Levine in 1971. Kathy found out that the elderly gentleman lived close to her home in Keyport, New Jersey. Kathy was interested in learning Irish music, and Ed McDermott was kindly and supportive. The two began playing together regularly, so it was no surprise that Ed McDermott agreed to play at the very first New Jersey Folk Festival in 1975.

On the revival side of the house, we featured Jim Albertson, a Folkways recording artist from southern New Jersey. For many years he was active as a teacher of the speech arts, oral interpretation, acting, and theater arts. He had many credits as an actor and director for community theater projects. He also conducted a weekly folk music radio show and was a member of the popular folk music group known as “The Bottle Hill Boys.” We recruited him as the main stage emcee for the first New Jersey Folk Festival in 1975, a task that he continued to perform for fourteen years. Known for his storytelling and his singing, Jim was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and he grew up in the surrounding area.

Putting the whole package together—the crafts, the food, the music—took nearly the entire academic year. Planning started in the fall semester of 1974 and switched into high gear during the spring semester of 1975. The last week in April was the final countdown with the festival scheduled for Saturday, and it was very scary. On the Monday before the festival, it started to rain, and the rain continued heavily all week long. It appeared that all of our planning and scheming was for naught. Then, miraculously, the weather cleared up early Saturday morning and the sun shone down on us. Now we had a chance for success, but we were still worried. Would anyone show up? We had no budget for advertising, so we had depended on the mercy of the local newspapers to pick up our press releases. We had some mention in the newspapers, but it was hardly a media blitz. To our amazement, nearly ten thousand people appeared. We were lucky for several reasons. The weather had cooperated, and this was the last weekend before final exams for thousands of students. They were looking for a chance to get outdoors and have a good time, so we were at the right place at the right time. In addition, we picked up many visitors who had come for the Ag Field Day next door, and they stumbled upon us. Whatever the reason, drawing ten thousand people on the very first festival was, by any account, a startling success. And this success was not overlooked by the local newspapers which gave us good coverage the very next day, helping to establish the festival as an event to anticipate the following year.

Still, I hesitated to plan a second annual festival. I had read a book by the then-president of the Avis Corporation, who advised against have a second annual anything. Despite the success of the event, I wrestled with the idea of continuing it annually. One strategy would have been to give myself a pat on the back and retire the festival. The weather question, along with the money and time and work to pull it off, gave me second thoughts. But I was reassured by the

American Studies department chairman, Michael Aaron Rockland, who felt that the university was an ideal setting with the requisite tradition, resources, and venue for such an undertaking.

A key resource is the fact that Rutgers has allowed overseeing the festival and teaching a related course to count in my course load. The course provides management experience and mentoring for some fourteen Rutgers students through a three-year sequence. The students can rotate through three of fourteen different jobs in such areas as music, crafts, publicity, foods, grants, and the like. The fact that I get released time to teach a course in folk festival management and the fact that the students are getting academic credit for their efforts allows the festival to function on more than a volunteer basis. It should be pointed out that the course requires more of a time commitment than most other courses. The students follow a procedures manual of some 200 pages that has been compiled over the years, based on actual experience.

More than 300 women are folk festival “alumnae,” a large number of whom have gone on to hold successful and responsible positions. Their folk festival experience as undergraduates virtually leaps off the pages of their resumes. Prospective employers are almost always curious about the festival, and this gives the student an opening to discuss her achievements in that context. The student is rarely at a loss for words, since there is so much to explain. Employers are almost always impressed when a student can explain that she had a significant part in managing an event with a \$40,000 budget that attracted a crowd of more than 10,000 people.

In retrospect, the notion of continuing the New Jersey Folk Festival as an annual event, although entailing an enormous amount of work, has been gratifying if for no other reason than it has been successful as an educational experiment in service learning. The festival has been a launching pad for hundreds of students who have gained valuable career experience and confidence that has served them well over the years.