

**BUILDING THE FOLK DANCE ARCHIVE**  
**keynote address delivered by Ron Houston**  
**at the 2007 NFO Convention in Salt Lake City, March 22-25**

**Why archive?**

Let's see hands out there. How many of you remember Dick Crum? Michael and Mary Ann Herman? Jane Farwell? Vyts Beliajus? Elizabeth Burchenal? Mary Wood Hinman? These people set the course of today's folk dancing.

But how did they do it? WHY did they do it? Who set THEIR courses? The answers are in archives, but folk dancers don't use archives, and I think I know why.

**First reason:** in Austin Texas (my home town), we have a huge granite box of a building just east of the State Capitol. It's called the Texas State Library and Archives. A man walked into the archives one day, found the director, and said "Hey Jack, show me something OLD." The director showed him an old document, and he said Thanks!, and walked out, satisfied. You see, people confuse archive, from *archeion* [ar-KAY-on], meaning



government, with *archaios* [ar-KĪ-os], meaning ancient. They think archives are where you store old things. But let me give you a better definition: archives are where we put yesterday's ephemera for use today. What's ephemera? Flyers, newsletters, programs, syllabi . . . SYLLABI are ephemera? Yes. We have received thousands of syllabi at the Society. Virtually none of them show signs of use. As leaders, we type them, illustrate them, print them, hand them out, and dancers write their names in them, file them in boxes, and 50 years later, their kids throw them away when they clean out the attic. Ephemera should not be in attics, awaiting disposal. They should be in archives where we can use them today.

So folk dancers misunderstand archives. **Next reason:** maybe you've heard this: "We do it differently in OUR village." Reminds me of Treasure of the Sierra Madre: "Badges? We don't need no stinkin' badges." Now if you're dancing at a wedding in Sevlievo and they're swinging their arms, and the next weekend you're dancing at a wedding just upstream in Gabrovo, and they're not swinging arms, then "we do it differently in our village" has some meaning. But if you're in Northfield,



North Dakota, and they dance Novo Zagorsko Horo starting to the right and reversing the footwork to make it come out, and they say "We do it differently in our village. That's the way Yves Moreau taught it in 1968" -- no he didn't. You FORGOT THE DANCE. "We do it differently in our village" is a lousy excuse for not looking in the archives to see how a dance is done. So I think some dancers (no one in this room!) view archives as a threat to the way they want to do dances.

So, people don't understand archives and "We do it differently in our village." Now, a **third reason** folk dancers don't use archives. I just finished five months of organizing the Society archives, and I got a request for etiquette posters. An organization wants to print posters for their groups. As I organized the archives, I read the histories of dozens of groups and camps and magazines, and I saw a progression. They started out with maybe one flyer a year, mimeographed, and a 10-page syllabus. Over the years, they became little publishing houses. And they incorporated. And they bought records, and record players, and amplifiers, and speakers and microphones. And they built wagons for the sound equipment. And they built portable dance floors.



And then they built buildings to store the dance floors. And people stopped coming. In other words, when a new person comes dancing, it's as if we usher them into the back seat of a well-built, well-oiled, well-driven limousine, and tour them through the wonderful world of folk dancing. Oh look! There's a Scandinavian dance! Oh look! There's a Yugoslav dance! But in the 1950s and 1960s, we had to BUILD the machine, including our own etiquette posters. And we take pride in what we did. So it made me think that folk dancing rests on four legs: enjoyment of dance, learning about

other cultures, camaraderie, and the pride of doing. If you weaken these legs, folk dancing collapses.

So what does this have to do with archives? If the veteran folk dancer sees value in the past, they MUST let the new dancer build their own machine; make their own mistakes; find their own way. So the veteran dancer CANNOT be a leader. You may become an advisor or an elder, but you must NOT be the leader. Therefore, you lose social capital. I think some veteran folk dancers (but no one in this room) view archives as a threat to their social capital.



So the picture of archives as old stuff, the view of archives as a threat to the way some people want to do dances, and the view of archives as a threat to social capital lead to forgotten dances, forgotten teachers, and forgotten history. What can we do? First, collect archives. Second, organize those archives. Third, digitize those archives.

Fourth, publish those digital archives. And this leads to my four recommendations for action by the NFO:

### **1. Collect**

The NFO must use its voice to tell every dancer: if you are not using those ephemera, donate them to an institution. If you are using them, bequeath them in your will. But do it now, unless you KNOW when you are going to die.

### **2. Organize**

The NFO should hold an archives processing seminar at next year's convention to teach acknowledgment (not as easy as it once was), organizing (how to arrange archives on the shelf), re-housing in archivally sound containers, and creating finding aids.

### **3. Digitize**

In Michigan, Susan Smith has digitized onto DVD a number of the Detroit area camps and workshops. Our own Loui Tucker is digitizing her own DVDs. The NFO should hold a digitizing seminar next year with sessions on digitizing audio (many people are doing it wrong now), video, and paper-based documents.

### **4. Publish**

Yves Moreau is digitizing and publishing valuable audio and video recordings. In Seattle, Christine Anderson published 25 years of Norsk Folkedans Stemne audio and video on CD and DVD. In Dayton, Leslie Hyll published over 50 years of Miami Valley folk dance syllabi on a CD. In Austin Texas (my home town), my wife Tatiana has digitized and published on the Internet thousands of images of medieval Slavic manuscripts. It CAN be done.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Our history remains in attics, awaiting disposal. It should be in archives for use today. We can do this by collecting, organizing, digitizing, and publishing archives. You will NOT create the perfect archive. DO IT ANYWAY. You will NOT have permission. DO IT ANYWAY. You will save the past and maybe the future of folk dancing.