

Memorandum

To: Montana Arts Council Members
From: Taylor Burby | Contract Folklorist
RE: June 2022; MAC Folk and Traditional Arts Programming Revival Report

Folk and Traditional Arts Program Revival

The Montana Arts Council has a long history developing robust folklife projects and programming, beginning with the inception of the Montana Folklife Project after the passage of HB 675 in 1979. In the decades to follow, my predecessors, including folklorists Mike Korn and Alexandra Swaney, implemented projects that identified, documented, and celebrated Montana’s rich living heritage. Such projects included statewide surveys, the Montana Living Treasures radio series, a broader apprenticeship program, cowboy poetry events, and countless exhibits. These projects documented and celebrated the work of tradition bearers including Crow elk tooth dress makers, Irish musicians, old time fiddlers, Salish singers and dancers, and western boot and spur makers.

However, as stated by Brian in his staff report, the only remaining survivals of MAC folk and traditional arts programming are MCAM and MCAM Apprenticeships, which have not engaged folk artists since 2016. For this reason, I am currently researching exemplary folk arts programs nationwide to make recommendations for updating MAC’s programs, to be revived in 2023. While not exhaustive, the following report discusses both why the revival of this currently neglected program is essential to a state council striving to serve all its community members as well as the different projects that can be implemented to achieve such a goal.

Project explanations are abbreviated in this report but will be expanded during my presentation, including who [benefits?], what [is it?], why [Montana?], where, when, and how (development; partnerships). Finally, this report does not represent the breadth of project potential in the state, which I will recommend through further elaboration in my final report to the MAC.

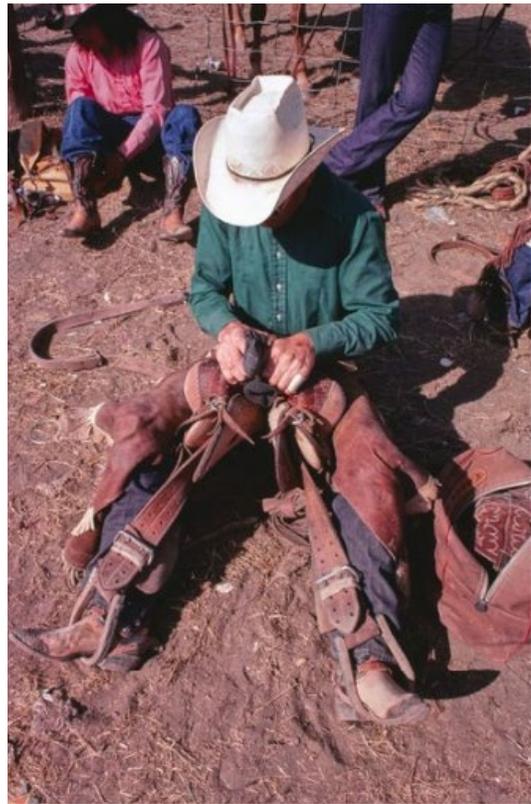


Mary Trotchie, Native American fiddler, Havre, Montana

Why Public Folklore?

MAC once documented, preserved, promoted, and celebrated the works of those folk artists and workers of traditional occupations who are a vital part of Montana's heritage and cultural landscape. It is through the work of public folklore, which observes community folklife and folk arts, that we see the expression of community values as well as the intersection of art and history; as these arts and occupations are born from community, they give us insight both into where we have come from and, as new generations pick up traditions, where we are going.

While the folk arts are a vital strand of the state's DNA, showing us what makes Montana, Montana, these individuals, their communities, and their work are often invisible to the public. Because folklore is the creative expression of small communities, it is learned through participation within those communities and depends on continued participation for survival. These traditions are living, and once the final tradition bearer within a community dies, so too does their knowledge and their unique way of Montana life.



Crow Fair

Building a strong folk and traditional arts program will advance the goals referenced in the council's mission statement by tending to and being reflective of the overall Montana way of life, with special consideration of and attention to those members living in reservations and rural areas who are currently severely underserved. The work of a public folklorist is to reach into these areas and engage communities that other council programs/projects cannot.

The first step towards reaching back into the communities is outreach. Outreach could then be followed by additional projects such as those I suggest.

Part One: Outreach and Local Programming

During our interviews, other state folklorists reported a direct correlation between their ability to travel, market, and network and the participation from those in underserved demographics and regions (reservations; rural communities). They also reported that many individuals in these areas did not know about the council or assistance available to them until contact with fieldworkers. The following projects would directly address outreach issues, and when completed strategically, these outreach projects can co-occur. I recommend these projects occur regionally (media aside) to give each district in Montana the attention it deserves.

1. *2022 Wrap-up*

The first step is to tie up the loose ends that have developed over the last decade: tend to four untouched Montana Circle of American Masters nominations and re-establish connection with nominees and honorees alike. The project will be completed by December 2022 and could include extending the opportunity for apprenticeship program participation to MAC artists in certain regions.

2. *Statewide Regional (Tourist District) Survey*
Moving into 2023, outreach via survey would be essential. The ethnographic research conducted throughout the survey would provide an assessment of the state's many traditions. During the survey, researchers can promote other programs and begin to develop a public roster of culture keepers who can be contacted for economic opportunities such as festivals, library and classroom events, podcasts, radio, or university speaker series.

3. *Media: Montana Public Radio & Yellowstone Public Radio*

As recommended by folklorists in states that struggled with outreach in rural areas, a Montana (MPR) or Yellowstone Public Radio (YPR) partnership would enable the MAC to reach underserved areas, including those with poor or no internet access. This partnership could initially appear as a reboot and extension of At Large Production and MAC folklorist Alexandra Swaney's collaboration, the "Montana Living Treasures" radio series.



Crow Fair

4. *Field School Training, Workshops, & Community Scholars*

Investing in developing a network of community scholars would enable the Council more consistent outreach to and documentation of underserved areas. Much like Montana, the Center of Washington Cultural Traditions has struggled with maintaining contact with the underserved areas in the eastern part of their state. As a means of both providing a service and establishing their presence in these areas, the center developed a field school. If implemented in Montana, individuals would learn cultural documentation skills and complete an independent research project. Individuals could then apply to be community scholars who maintain contact with and report to the MAC on matters related to local culture.

5. *Then: Community-based Projects*

Once completed, outreach projects can inform community-based and -led projects, determined by the community's expressed needs. Projects may include exhibits, local festivals, or workshops.

Part Two: Beyond Local Programming

1. *Essentials: (A broader) Apprenticeship Program*

Apprenticeship programs encourage the survival of a state's traditional arts and culture by offering support for tradition bearers, or master artists, seeking to provide an apprentice with intensive training. Over the course of the contracted project duration—typically between 3-12 months, skilled and experienced master artists or tradition bearers work with and mentor one apprentice each. These bearers teach skills related to some tradition in their community in an effort to preserve and cultivate it for future generations. Rather than limited to MCAM honorees, this apprenticeship program would be available to tradition bearers across the state.

2. *Education: The Powerful Art of Storytelling - A High School Project*

As folk and traditional culture is part of the everyday lived experience, youth investment in their community's cultural traditions is necessary for its survival. The Powerful Art of Storytelling is an investment that would provide in-depth folklore/storytelling, photographic, and audio documentary training. Such a program would promote student participation in capturing the stories of their communities and otherwise "hidden in plain sight" aspects of their cultural traditions. After undergoing classroom workshops led by local experts, participants create short, broadcast quality audio documentaries on the stories, folklore, arts and traditions of their families and communities.

3. *Arts in Public Health: Stories for Creative Forces*

In March of 2022, the US Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs announced Montana Senator Jon Tester's pilot program Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act. According to the announcement, this health act will expand rural veterans' access to forms of therapy such as "animal therapy, agrotherapy, sports and recreation therapy, art therapy and more." As an underserved population, there is potential need for a Montana Arts Council folk-arts-oriented veterans' project that facilitates a space for community-based arts engagement, promoting creative self-expression and community building, as modeled by Texas' Stories for Creative Forces. Undergoing storytelling training could not only benefit veteran health but provide veterans with economic opportunities.

4. *Archives*

Establishing an archive through partnerships would allow the MAC to continue collecting as well as properly preserve, arrange, describe, and make accessible archival material.