

Along About Sundown ... 1928 - 2002

The Mountain Dance and
Folk Festival Celebrates 75 Years





Along About Sundown . . . 1928 - 2002

The Mountain Dance and Folk Festival Celebrates 75 Years

"Those of us who attended the Mountain Dance and Music Festival held at McCormick Field last night were very much impressed with the charm, simplicity, and naturalness of the program. We think that the Asheville Chamber of Commerce is to be congratulated upon the vision they had seven years ago before people in general recognized and understood the worth of the fine old traditional ballads and mountain music . . . As a nation, we are just old enough to recognize the beauty and worth of our pioneer ways . . . The spontaneous response of the audiences to the folk festival here this week indicates in the strongest terms that the people of Asheville and Western North Carolina are tremendously interested in the arts which are a genuine part of their heritage. We should take pride in these folk arts and they should be developed and presented in public programs each year as something distinctive and unique, something that will doubtless serve to attract to the region thousands and thousands of people who are interested in this valuable heritage from our pioneer ancestors."

— excerpt from a 1934 radio address on Asheville station WWNC by Miss Sarah Gertrude Knott, director of the National Folk Festival, St. Louis, Missouri.



1928 - 2002



MOUNTAIN
DANCE & FOLK
FESTIVAL

This book and a four-part series of performance and discussion programs held during the spring of 2002 were made possible with a grant from the



North Carolina Humanities Council
Weaving Cultures and Communities

RIGHT: from left Luke Smathers, Bea Smathers
and Harold Smathers.

Table of Contents

Welcome & Introduction

Jo Lunsford Herron

3



Mountain Dance & Folk Festival - A Living Tradition

Loyal Jones

4



Ballads & Storytelling

Betty Smith

14



Dancing at the Mountain Dance & Folk Festival

Phil Jamison

20



Shared Traditions - A Musician's Perspective

Roger Howell

26

Folk Heritage Committee

32

Acknowledgements

33

© 2002 Folk Heritage Committee
Asheville, North Carolina
All rights reserved.

Written materials and photographs
compiled and edited by Melanie Rice,
Kara Rogers, and Don Talley.

Graphic Design
Susan Rhew Design Inc



Welcome & Introduction

Jo Lunsford Herron

Loyal Jones, Betty Smith, Phil Jamison, and Roger Howell have contributed some great background information about the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival for this 75th Anniversary program. Yes, this is the 75th time that musicians and dancers from the Southern Appalachian Region will come together to celebrate our wonderful heritage with their Festival.

We want to express sincere appreciation to the Folk Heritage Committee of the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce. Joe Holbert, Chairman, and Leesa Sutton, Coordinator, and their committee have presented some splendid activities for this 75th Anniversary celebration.

Our family grew up knowing that “along about sundown,” the first week-end of August, our father, Bascom Lamar Lunsford, would be encouraging people to come and share their music and dance with each other and perform for all who would come. My sisters and I have wonderful memories of Festival time at McCormick Field, the City Auditorium and other sites where the Festival has been held over the years.

As we enjoy this year’s Festival, we have great appreciation and memories of all those wonderful artists who, over the past 75 years, performed their music and dance and shared it down through the generations. Bascom Lamar Lunsford helped them bring the worth and dignity of their heritage to the world as well as to future generations of audience members and performers alike.

“I think it’s very important to me as an individual that dad be given proper recognition because I saw that he went against all. Everybody was trying to forget their mountain roots and forget their heritage and not ever be called a hillbilly again. And I saw his pride in what he was doing. And when nobody really would do much for him he went ahead and did it anyway. And I learned that if something is worth doing, you just — you go ahead and do it, you don’t question it. And that has really been worth a lot to me.”

— Jo Lunsford Herron, reflecting on her father’s role as founder of the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival



LEFT: Square dancers, 1950s.

RIGHT: (from left) Bryan Sutton and Shane Herren, 1986.

"I heard what Bluegrass came out of because when I was about sixteen in 1935, I went to Bascom Lunsford's Mountain Dance Festival in Asheville, North Carolina, and that's really what got me playing a banjo. Up to that time, I'd strum the ukulele and the tenor banjo in the school jazz band, and when I heard Samantha Bumgarner lean back in her rocking chair and sing "Lord Thomas" or "Lord Randall" or one of them other "Lords," why I just thought that was wonderful. And Bascom himself gave me a little ten-minute lesson in banjo picking"

— Pete Seeger, from a 1976 article in *Pickin'* magazine
by Roger Siminoff and Don Kissel



Mountain Dance & Folk Festival - A Living Tradition

Loyal Jones

Author of *Minstrel of the Appalachians: The Story of Bascom Lamar Lunsford*, University of Kentucky Press, reprint 2002
Berea, Kentucky



Western North Carolina native Bascom Lamar Lunsford developed, from an early age, a passion for the ballads, folk songs, and dances of the Southern Appalachian Mountains. As a young boy, he began playing the banjo and fiddle, learning many songs, tunes, and dances from his neighbors. In his varied vocational ventures (which included fruit tree salesman, promoter of honey bees, teacher, and lawyer), he had countless opportunities to seek out those who were the keepers and performers of rich local traditions. By the time Lunsford settled in Buncombe County, then an attorney and gentleman farmer, he had also established himself as a well-known singer, musician, and collector, the General Phonograph Corporation already having released two disks with four of his songs.

In 1928, the Asheville Chamber of Commerce planned to stage the Rhododendron Festival to call attention to the beauty and climate of what the promoters had taken to calling the 'Land of the Sky.' Chamber officials approached Lunsford to arrange a folk song and dance program as a part of the Festival, which also included handicraft displays, romantic pageants, and beautiful baby contests. Lunsford recruited five square dance clubs to compete for prizes and invited ballad singers, fiddlers, banjo pickers, and string bands to entertain on Pack Square. Five thousand

TOP LEFT: (from left) Tommy Hunter and Earl Ward, 1975.

LEFT: Joe Bly, longtime Festival emcee.

RIGHT: (from left) Marcus Martin, Bill McElreath, and Samantha Bumgarner.







LEFT: (far left) Bill McElreath, 1960.

BELOW LEFT: Unidentified dancer at Shindig on the Green (from left) Jack Penland, Clyde Cable, and Erwin Penland. Courtesy of Asheville Chamber of Commerce. Photography by Bob Lindsay.

RIGHT: Mountain Dance and Folk Festival backstage.

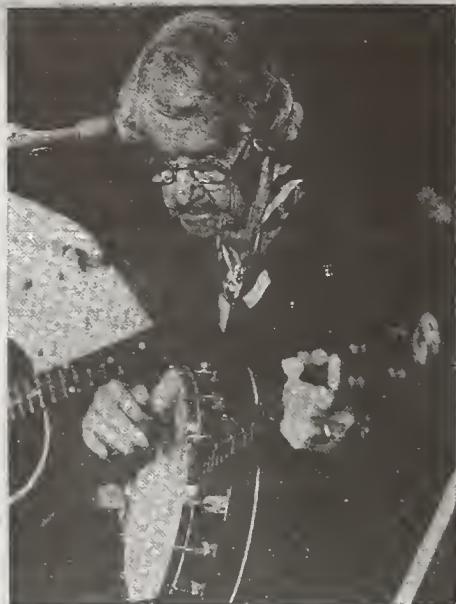


people descended upon downtown Asheville and were backed up against office buildings, draped across Zeb Vance's monument and hanging out of the windows of local businesses. The *Asheville Citizen* described the music as a "... throwback from the modern jazz world..." and went on to say that it should be "... a permanent thing, something that might be continued from year to year as a festival of Western North Carolina — on the order of the great festivals of older nations which have been handed down from generation to generation."

Despite the Stock Market crash in 1929, the Rhododendron Festival was held again, with Lunsford's folk performers continuing to draw large crowds. By 1930, however, the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival had developed enough of a following to become a separate event. It was scheduled at a later date than the Rhododendron Festival and was moved to McCormick Field in order to accommodate the growing audience. The *Asheville Citizen* announced that "... more than 200 mountain dancers and musicians from Western North Carolina [would take part]." The Rhododendron Festival continued through the 1930s with fewer events each year and was finally discontinued during World War II. The Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, on the other hand, continued to grow in popularity with both performers as well as







AUNT RILLA RAY of Sodom Laurel, N.C. fiddles, plays the banjo mountain clawhammer style and will clog at the sound of a old time mountain band. She will be one of some 200 performers of the Southern Appalachians who will participate in the 47th Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville, August 1 - 2 - 3.

200 Mountaineers Will Sing, Play In 47th Festival

autoharps, tune bows, the psalter of the middle ages, the mountain 5-string banjo, musical saws and the wash tub bass will be heard.

For mountain people the late Bascom Lamar Lunsford's annual breakdown has always been an opportunity to reach back and to re-identify with their past, to hear again the traditional ballads of England, Ireland and Scotland which were long preserved in mountain cabins and handed down unwritten from parent to child.

The great English collector of folk ballads, Cecil Sharp, after a 14-month search in the mountain counties in 1916-17 returned to England with more than 550 variants of ballads and tunes that had their roots in the culture of the old world.

As it has always been at Mr. Bascom's festival, there will be no electronic instruments, no over amplification, no pop, few cowboy hats and no guadily sequined shirts.

Just as in Mr. Bascom's day, the objective remains to present mountain folk performers as they are, "A plain story simply told." In the words of Bascom Lunsford, and to preserve for generations yet unborn cultural traditions of the Southern Highlands.

According to Mrs. Earl "Jackie" Ward, of the sponsoring Folk Heritage Committee of the Asheville Area Chamber, who carries the responsibility of maintaining contact with mountain performers, change continues swiftly.

the Seventeen year old Gwen Biddix of Spruce Pine playing song "Whoe Mule" on the short side of the bridge of a 5-string banjo. "She is truly great."

Cas Wallin of Sodom Laurel, 73 years and 5' 8", rearing back to belt out "Sweet Margaret and Lord William."

Mrs. Ward lives mountain music 14 months of the year. On behalf of the festival she goes where folk performers live. Often she is there when they come together to play for their own enjoyment.

She knows, as folklorist Bascom Lunsford knew, that his "neighbors" like to be invited. As a result she has extended personal invitations to considerably more than the 200 folk artists who will actually be able to participate.

Mountain play party, a frolic, an old time breakdown...Mr. Bascom's festival! Nothing quite like anywhere else in the world. For the first time in its 47 years there will be advance tickets on sale, now at the Civic Center ticket office.

Mountain fiddler Byard Sned Ray, one of the very few still doing double stop fiddling. "I almost cry when I hear him."



Liz Smathers of Dutch Cove, fiddles with the Smathers family string band. Disposed to fold her fiddle under her arm and break into some free wheeling clog steps.

"My favorite recollections of the Festival are of my Dad, Ray Hutchinson, on stage. Also of Tommy Hunter, Grover Sutton, Ralph Fox, Red Parham, Gordon and his son Terry Freeman, and dozens of others that kept the Festival traditional."

— Marilyn McMinn-McCredie, 2002

Attending the Festival since 1940 as a babe-in-arms and participant since 1993.

NINTH ANNUAL

Mountain Dance Contest

AND

Mountain Music Festival

ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

1936



A 90-YEAR OLD FESTIVAL PARTICIPANT

THREE NIGHTS, JULY 23-24-25, 8 o'Clock

MCCORMICK FIELD (BASEBALL PARK)

Twelve Dance Teams and Twelve Mountain Bands compete for Championship Prizes

More than One Hundred Ballad and Folk Singers and Musicians

400 Participants from all Sections of Western North Carolina and Mountain Sections of Adjoining States

A UNIQUE FOLK ENTERTAINMENT, DISTINCTIVE OF THE MOUNTAINS

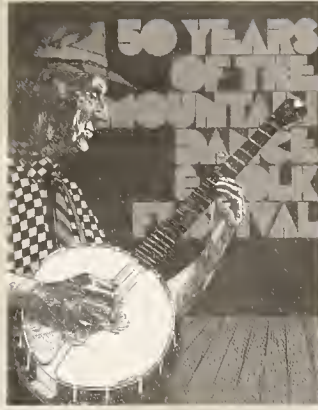
Under the Auspices of the Asheville Chamber of Commerce

LEFT: Asheville Citizen article, 1973.

ABOVE: Festival Handbill, 1936.

ABOVE RIGHT FROM LEFT: Festival Program, 1970. Festival Program, 1977. Festival Brochure, 1985. Festival Brochure, 1986.





58th annual mountain dance and folk festival

August 1, 2, & 3



From the most elevated high crests
of the Blue Ridge and Great Smoky
Mountains, comes a sound you'll hear
in Asheville, North Carolina



Asheville, NC

59th Annual mountain dance and folk festival

August 7, 8 & 9

Asheville,
North
Carolina



audience members. Perhaps Lunsford's Festival provided a genuine and authentic contrast to the romantic pageants of the Rhododendron Festival as well as a welcome reprieve from international turmoil.

The success of the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival diverted Lunsford from his law practice and the family farm. He felt that more of his time was required to encourage dance groups from specific communities to compete in the Festival. He also spent more and more time visiting the traditional performers that he heard about through word of mouth. Other musicians and song collectors, such as Pete Seeger, Artus Moser, Dorothy Scarborough, Frank C. Brown, and Lamar Stringfield, sought him out as an authority on Southern Mountain folksongs and string music. Record companies and collectors came to record him as well as to get leads on other native artists. Bascom was always on the prowl, seeking out the best of mountain performers. They included such singers and instrumentalists as fiddler and banjo picker Aunt Samantha Bumgarner; Fiddlin' Bill Hensley; Aunt Rilla Ray and her son Byard, both fiddlers; banjoist and singer Obay Ramsey; clog-dancer and banjoist Bill McElreath; singer, guitarist, and harmonica player Red Parham; and many others. At first, the musicians came from the counties surrounding Asheville. As the Festival progressed, however, Lunsford invited singers from elsewhere, such as Piedmont banjoist and singer George Pegram, and Kentucky ballad singers Pleaz

Moble and Virgil Sturgill. For the most part, however, the musicians and dancers continued to hail from Western North Carolina.

Bascom was suspicious of aspiring folk singers from 'up North.' He spurned Mike Seeger, although he had earlier worked for his father Charles Seeger in the Farm Resettlement Administration and had taught Mike's brother Pete licks on the banjo. Roger Sprung, a banjo picker from New York, said that Lunsford once threw him off the stage when he had insinuated himself into a string band that was scheduled to play. Lunsford wanted to present only the best of Southern Appalachian folk musicians and dancers. It took him a while to see how eager young musicians from elsewhere were to learn the authentic music of the mountains. His Festival inspired many a tourist to go purchase a musical instrument and to start learning folksongs or to get involved in square dance groups.

Lunsford had other conflicts in his Festival. Sometimes a musician was top-notch, but he might have 'problems.' Bascom, a devout Methodist, said, "You have to get people you can depend on. You may have the finest musician in the world, but he may not be reliable. He may drink too much." There were several of those, and Bascom dealt with them, and other 'troublemakers,' with a swift hand, sometimes not to the satisfaction of everyone. Once, when a local radio station was broadcasting the Festival, the announcer allegedly took over the microphone to





direct the show to his liking, and Bascom reportedly laid him out with his banjo. Then, there was the matter of allowing electrical instruments into the Festival, which Lunsford abhorred but finally agreed to, which then led to toe and heel taps on the dancers' shoes to compete with the volume of the music. Lunsford was usually reasonable in accommodating the performer's aesthetic as long as he felt that they were striving for their best and most authentic potential. If he could get ballad singers to do ballads he recognized and admired, he would allow them to sing other songs of their liking that may have come from writers in Tin Pan Alley or Nashville. Personally, he thought that the flashy clogging steps were less authentic than the smooth steps in square dancing, but he saw that the clog caught the imagination of the younger folk, and so he allowed the clog dance competition to become a major part of his program. Thus, the Festival can be credited with being one of the events that encouraged the popularity and profusion of clog dance teams in Western North Carolina.

The square dance and string band competitions sometimes also caused 'trouble' in the same way referees' decisions bring down the wrath of fans at basketball games. Lunsford selected judges that he thought had knowledge and feeling for what was the best in each performance, but sometimes the competitors, or their enthusiastic friends and relatives, disagreed vociferously with the decisions. Ever the negotiating diplomat, Lunsford was quick to soothe hurt feelings and kept the performers smoothly rotating on and off stage, and the eager audience members continued to wait in long lines, ready to be entertained. But he wanted his Festival to seem as informal as possible and announced that the program would begin 'along about sundown,' rather than at a specific moment as it was his intention that the tourist feel that he or she was attending a happening and not a set show.

Recognized for his notable achievements as the Festival's organizer, Lunsford's skills were soon in high demand. His stewardship helped develop a number of

US festivals, some of which continue to this day. For Lunsford, however, the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival remained his crowning achievement. Like any other event, the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival has had its ups and downs. With the coming of television, social activation, the Civil Rights movement, Rock and Roll, and other attractions, the audience dwindled in the early 1960s. In 1963, the Asheville Chamber of Commerce threw its support into a competing festival to be called the Festival of American Folklore, designed to make Asheville the folk capital of the United States. The new festival featured well-known performers such as Pete Seeger, Jean Ritchie, Doc Watson, the Weavers, and Judy Collins. Although it was a great show, it was a financial disaster and was never held again. At the same time, Bob Lindsey came to the Chamber as a travel promoter and photographer. He teamed up with the aging Lunsford to make his Festival better known to a new generation. He grew to respect Lunsford, who accepted him as a talented and enthusiastic partner to his life's work. Lindsey's stunning photographs of performers and his tireless promotion of the Festival breathed new life into the event. Simultaneous to Lindsey's efforts, the folk revival of the 1960s rekindled interest in the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, the oldest festival of its kind in the country. People from all over the United States had moved to Western North Carolina as part of the back-to-the-land movement, and many of these young people were drawn to the folk arts as an example of the simple and honest lives they were seeking. Also, many tourists loved to return to Asheville during the Festival to get an annual taste of Appalachian folk arts. Thus the 1960s stood for a time of rebirth for the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, which continues to cater to sold out shows through its 75th year.


These years also gave rise to the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival's successful offshoot, the Shindig on the Green. In the early decades at the Festival, musicians gathered at the Westgate Shopping Center to pick and sing into the wee hours of the morning. These jam sessions were a wonderful inspiration to young musicians and a chance for them to







improve their skills by playing with the older artists. Jackie Ward, then the Festival's Director, and the Folk Heritage Committee hit upon the idea of making this happening the means of finding additional performers for the Festival. The Shindig on the Green has been held nearly every Saturday evening during the summer in downtown Asheville and it attracts thousands of listeners each evening. Musicians and string bands can sign up to perform, and those that are judged outstanding are invited to the Festival stage.

Though Bascom Lamar Lunsford died on September 4, 1973, his legacy lives on through the work of the Folk Heritage Committee. The Festival, as it remains today, is forever indebted to Lunsford and others who shared, and continue to share, his vision. Those names are too plentiful to mention in full, but special recognition should be made to Bascom's son Lamar and daughter Jo Herron; Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce officials; Jerry Israel; Jackie and Earl Ward; Zack Allen; Stewart Canter; and Leesa Sutton. The Mountain Dance and Folk Festival is now held on Pack Square in the Diana Wortham Theatre. It showcases the best in Western North Carolina folk talent, just as it did when Bascom Lamar Lunsford presided over the Festival. 

LEFT: Unidentified dancer at Shindig on the Green (musicians from left Clyde Cable, Boyd Black, and Erwin Penland.
TOP: (from left) Ren Bannerman, Lee Ann Bannerman, and Alan Bell, 1983. Courtesy of the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce Archives.
TOP RIGHT: Carolina Cut-Ups, 1989.
RIGHT: Unidentified dancers.

"For forty-six years I've never had a written program, never had a piece of paper in my hand. I know the fellers, knew what they played, knew how well they did it, you see."

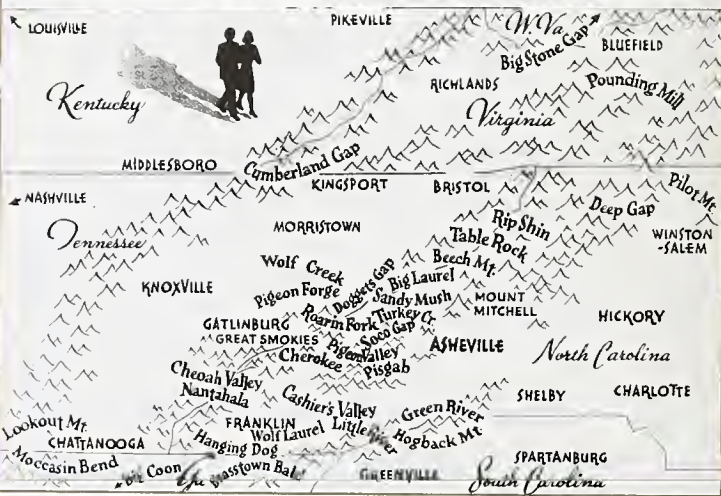
— Bascom Lamar Lunsford
quote from a 1974 article in *Southern Exposure*.





The Mountain Ballad Country

WHEREIN LIVES THE TRADITION OF THE DANCING AND MUSIC WHICH THE PEOPLE BRING EACH YEAR TO THE FAMOUS ASHEVILLE FOLK FESTIVAL ★





Ballads & Storytelling

Betty Smith
Ballad Singer
Hot Springs, North Carolina

Each group of kindred people who crossed the waters brought their own lore and traditions — those things of the mind and spirit that stayed with them no matter how hard life became in settling in a new world. This wealth of oral tradition has been called “the literature of the mind” — things learned by word of mouth and passed from one generation to the next without benefit of the written word. Singing ballads and telling stories were ways for people to entertain themselves and each other, but more than that, they were a part of everyday life. Ballads and stories have a richness of spirit not found in most commercial music. It is a reflection of how people lived, and how they felt about life and living. We can feel the pain and sorrow, share in the joy, and laugh at the ridiculous. The themes in the stories and songs are universal. They still have as much meaning for people today as they did two hundred years ago.

A ballad is a narrative song that tells a story sung to a simple tune, generally called “old love songs” or “false true love songs” by the singers. When the words were put to paper they were called “ballets.” Some folk songs express emotions and describe people and places, but ballads are concerned with action. The singer is a storyteller singing of a dramatic moment not concerned with motivation or emotion but with the story and the character’s reaction to it. Of

“The first Festival I attended [in 1930] was in McCormick Field, which was also the first time the Festival was held there. I did not have the twenty-five cents to get in but, as I was with Bascom’s niece [Mary Medford], he let us both in for free!”

— Lois Y. Roberson, 2001
Attending the Festival since age 14.



LEFT: Red Parham.

LEFT INSERT: Map of Ballad Country from a 1955 brochure.

RIGHT TOP: (from left) Lena Jean Ray, Donna Ray Norton, Melanie Rice, and Sheila Adams, 2001.

RIGHT BOTTOM: (from left) Mary Medford and Lois Roberson, 2001.





particular interest to academicians were the ancient ballads from the Frances James Child collection *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* — they were ‘of the people,’ and therefore popular in the true sense of the word.

Olive Dame Campbell, founder of the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina, began gathering songs in 1908 while assisting her husband John C. Campbell in his research in the Southern Mountains. She was responsible for bringing Cecil Sharp, the noted English collector, to the mountains in 1916. This collaboration produced *English Folk-Songs in the Southern Appalachians*, the most valuable collection of mountain songs. Campbell and Sharp were the first collectors to write down the tunes of the songs. Sharp was interested in ballads and songs of British origin and the Campbells took him first to Madison County, North Carolina, in what is called ‘The Laurel Country.’ This land along the North Carolina-Tennessee border proved to be fertile ground for ballad singers and Sharp pronounced singing a community art form. He said, “I found myself for the first time in my life in a community in which singing was as common and almost as universal as speaking.” Mrs. Jane Gentry, of Hot Springs in Madison County, sang seventy songs and ballads for him, more than any other singer in this country. Mrs. Gentry was, as were many ballad singers, also known as a storyteller. Fifteen of her Jack tales and fairy tales were published in *The Journal of American Folklore* in 1925.

Bascom Lamar Lunsford was born in 1882 in Madison County and dedicated his life to the preservation of these oral traditions. He learned the ballads and songs and stories and committed them to memory, but he was also interested in having the local people understand the importance of their music. He wanted people from outside the mountains to hear these native born singers and believed they would like what they heard. And they did.

TOP LEFT: Maggie Lauterer and Zack Allen. Courtesy of Glenn Bannerman Collection.

LEFT: Laura Boosinger.

RIGHT: Unidentified ballad singer. Courtesy of Asheville Chamber of Commerce. Photography by Bob Lindsay.





"1949 was the first year I performed at the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival. After being auditioned in one of the practice rooms, we were back stage with Bascom Lamar Lunsford. Bascom smiled and commented to me, 'You don't sound like Roy Acuff or Lester Flatt — you just open your mouth and sing and that's good. I'll put you on.' My first paycheck, for \$5.00, is still in my Bible. I never cashed it."

— Harry West, 2002

Festival participant since the age of 23.



ABOVE: Betty Smith.
RIGHT: (far left) Bascom Lunsford, (far right) Virgil Sturgill. Courtesy of Asheville Chamber of Commerce. Photography by Bob Lindsay.
FAR RIGHT: Sheila Adams.

Through the seventy-five years of the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, ballad singers have been an important part of the event. There was Pleaz Mobley from Kentucky singing "Pretty Polly," Virgil Sturgill singing "Jackie Frazier," Rilla Ray singing "The Orphan Child," Obray Ramsey singing "Young Emily," Betty Smith singing "Barbara Allen," Joe Wilson singing "Banks of the Ohio," Berzilla Wallin singing "Death, Oh, Death," Dellie Norton singing "The Little Farmer Boy," Sheila Adams singing "Little Mathey Groves," as well as Mary Jane Queen, Jim Trantham, Lena Jean Ray, Maggie Lauterer, Jean Schilling, Harry and Jeannie West, and many others over the years. In the tradition of Bascom Lunsford, who was a natural storyteller, David Holt, The Folk Tellers (Barbara Freeman and Connie Reagan), Marilyn McMinn-McCredie, and others have taken the Festival stage as storytellers. And now the next generation of youthful ballad singers, like Melanie Rice and Donna Ray Norton, are taking the stage and singing the old love songs that are their birth right and are giving us the hope that this rich and important tradition will continue to maintain for many more generations to come. 🏡





"In these Mountains there is beauty, and the folk dances I saw last night are genuine and real and filled with all the grace that is natural when something is created for beauty...I want to congratulate those who are in charge of the Festival here on the idea that made it possible and the way in which they are keeping the dances free from stagy effects and the contamination of other dances."

— Elizabeth Burchenal, President of the American Folk Dance Society, NY, as quoted in the *Asheville Citizen* in 1932.



Dancing at the Mountain Dance & Folk Festival

Phil Jamison

Warren Wilson College
Swannanoa, North Carolina



Dancing has always been a central feature of the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival. Bascom Lamar Lunsford was an avid dancer as well as musician, and he sought to preserve and promote the traditional mountain square dance that was once an integral part of community life in Western North Carolina. These events were family affairs with young and old alike participating at barn raisings, corn shuckings, and other community gatherings. By the 1920s, the growing number of tourists to Western North Carolina had caught on to the entertainment value of mountain square dancing. Prior to Lunsford's first festival in 1928, Sam Queen had organized a group of dancers to demonstrate square dance figures for the tourists staying at the various hotels in Haywood County. Queen's group, the Soco Gap Square Dancers, as well as groups from other nearby communities, were the initial groups invited by Lunsford to come and dance on stage at his Festival. That first year five "dancing clubs" from Western North Carolina competed for \$100 in prize money on an outdoor dance platform built at Pack Square in downtown Asheville.

In the early years of the Festival, the competing teams danced as they would at a community square dance, using a "smooth" step. The basic form of the mountain square dance was a "big ring" of eight couples, breaking into

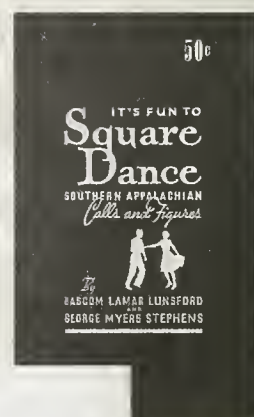
TOP LEFT: (from left) Jackie Ward, Aileen Greene, and Floyd King. Courtesy of the Jackie Ward Collection, Mars Hill College Archives.

LEFT: (from left) Jimmy and Charles Boyd. Courtesy of Lunsford Collection, Mars Hill College Archives.

RIGHT: Pisgah View Ranch Dancers.







TOP: (from left) Byard Ray, Red Parham, Betty Smith, Gary Spence, and Bill McElreath. Courtesy of Asheville Chamber of Commerce. Photography by Bob Lindsay.
ABOVE: (from left) Ren Bannerman, Glenn Bannerman, and Lamar Lunsford, 1977. Courtesy of Glenn Bannerman Collection.

Get Your Partners!

Six to sixteen couples make a good group, but there must always be an even number of couples.

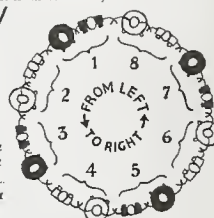
Form A Ring!

All join hands, lady on partner's right. The lady on a man's left is his corner lady.

Count Off!

Caller counts "One", each gentleman counting in turn counter-clockwise around the ring. Remember whether you are an odd or an even couple.

Odd couples are shown in DARK CLOTHING both in photographs & sketches. EVEN couples are shown in LIGHT CLOTHING.



Start The Music!

All Go Left! Keeping hands joined, dancers circle sidewise to left half-way around, then to right half-way back.

Now Half-Way Back!

LEFT: Ren Bannerman. Courtesy of Glenn Bannerman Collection.

ABOVE: Square Dance Instructional Booklet by Bascom Lamar Lunsford and George Myers Stephens, 1966.



"I participate in the Festival to preserve something vitally important to our mountains. Clogging is a mountain tradition and a part of who we are. Our goal is to keep the tradition alive and keep it the way it was."

— Gene Messer, 2001
Festival participant since the late 1970s.



groups of two couples for figures such as "Right Hands Across," "Bird in the Cage," or "Georgia Rang Tang." Large group figures were also included, such as "London Bridge" and "King's Highway," allowing individual dancers the chance to occasionally show off their buckdance and flat-foot steps. "Buckdancing" and "flatfooting" are names used for the traditional percussive step dancing of Western North Carolina. Like the music, the dance steps are a cultural blend, with roots in British, African American, and Cherokee dancing.

More and more dance teams began to include percussive steps in their performance, and as the dancers became more competitive by trying to outdo each other at the yearly competition, the traditions of team dancing began to evolve. In 1958, the Festival's square dance competition split into two categories: "Smooth Dance" and "Clog Dance." The smooth style teams continued with their original style, while the other groups, in what became known as "Traditional Freestyle Clogging," allowed the dancers more freedom to display their individual footwork as long as they maintained a rhythmic cadence with the rest of the group. The word "clogging," borrowed from the English form of percussive dance, was first used to describe Southern Appalachian dancing as early as the 1930s. Today in Western North Carolina, the word "clogger" has now become synonymous with "square dancer."



TOP: (third from right) Gertie Mae Morgan with fellow dancers of the first Mountain Dance and Folk Festival.
ABOVE: Unidentified dancers.





In the 1950s, the Blue Ridge Mountain Dancers, a group from Henderson County led by James Kesterson, developed a flashier style that involved opening up into a chorus line, with dancers performing synchronized steps while facing the audience. This newer form, now called "Precision Clogging," radically broke with the mountain square dance tradition of the "big circle," and in 1970 it was banned from the Festival competition in favor of the more traditional styles. By this time the Festival itself had become a tradition, and it would be inevitable that every living tradition should experience innovation by some and resistance to change by others.




LEFT: (from left) Bascom Lunsford, J.P. Fisher, and Bill McElreath.

ABOVE TOP: (from left) Bill McElreath, Bascom Lunsford, and Rilla Ray.

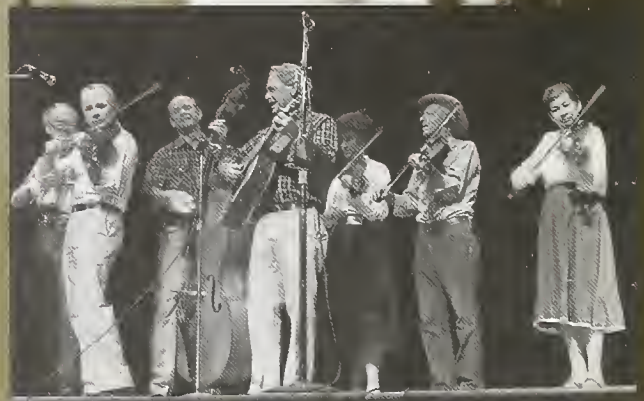
ABOVE: (far right) Bill McElreath.

RIGHT: Valley Springs Smooth Dance Team, 1970.

In the early years of the Festival, dance teams wore street clothes, as they would at a community dance. As early as 1933 some groups began wearing matching outfits, and by the 1950s, colorful matching costumes, not unlike modern square dance apparel, had become the standard. Another change, which was resisted by Lunsford to no avail, was the addition of metal taps to the dancers' shoes beginning in the early 1950s.

Team dancing, which began here in Asheville at Lunsford's Mountain Dance and Folk Festival seventy-five years ago and evolved into Traditional Freestyle Clogging, is the foundation of modern Precision Clogging, which has now become popular all across the country. While the older Smooth Style square dance teams are now rare, Traditional Freestyle Clogging continues to thrive in Western North Carolina, and even though the dance competition was discontinued in the late 1980s, non-competitive performances by dance teams remain a vital component of the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in celebration of this long-standing mountain dance tradition. 







Shared Traditions - A Musician's Perspective

Roger Howell
Fiddler
Mars Hill, North Carolina

Each summer, for the past 75 years, people from all over the country have converged on Asheville, North Carolina, to witness a gathering of some of the best Southern Appalachian musicians, dancers, and ballad singers. Since its creation in 1928 by Bascom Lamar Lunsford, also known as the 'Minstrel of the Appalachians,' scores of exceptional fiddlers, banjo, and guitar pickers and singers have presented, in their own unique styles, those great native folk traditions that have been handed down to them through the generations. And, as most any of these mountain folk would tell you, to perform at this Festival is not only to honor these traditions, but also to honor a vanishing way of life here in these rugged hills.

Up here in these Western North Carolina mountains, at one time, music had a great social and cultural significance and recalled styles of playing and tunes of centuries long past. Much of the local music hails from the 'old country,' Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. These tunes and traditional dances are deeply rooted in the local communities. So it may be said that most of the performers at the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival have received a rich frontier culture and are proud heirs to their musical heritage.

LEFT: (from left) Ken Harrison, Mac Snoderly, Boyd Black, Leonard Hollifield, Leesa Sutton, Grover Sutton, and Mary Henigbaum.

TOP RIGHT: Quay Smathers and Byard Ray.

RIGHT: (from left) Danny Johnson, Alan Johnson, and Flave Hart, 1997.

"The Festival has been an outlet for traditional music. It has been a place where musicians can play for others and where many people have been exposed for the first time to our roots."

— Nick Hallman, 2002

Festival participant since the early 1970s.





LEFT: Tommy Hunter, 1975. Courtesy of Richard Roberts Collection.

BELOW LEFT: (from left) Adam Landers and Josh Goforth, 1996.

RIGHT: (from left) Peter Gott, Byard Ray, and Bill McElreath.



Being part of this unique heritage of mountain music is indeed a great honor for these performers, and they are keenly aware of the importance of carrying on these traditions to the next generations. I have performed at the Festival myself for the past ten years and I can tell you that a feeling of greatness surrounds us each year as the curtain goes up on that stage. I suppose some of that feeling comes from the knowledge of where the tunes came from. Our teachers, many of whom are gone now, were some of the most outstanding mountain musicians of all time. The great fiddlers for instance, like Tommy Hunter, Byard Ray, and Luke Smathers among others, selflessly coached younger generations of players and now their styles and tunes can still be heard at the Festival year after year at the hands of Arvil Freeman, Mack Snoderly, and Josh Goforth. Also, a much more recent form of music called Bluegrass is alive and well at the Festival thanks to the talent of The Cockman Family, George Buckner, and Four of a Kind. It is truly inspiring for me, as a musician, to watch young people like Flave Hart take up the banjo style of the legendary Carroll Best with such energy and enthusiasm!

It seems I'm always quite nervous backstage just before it is my time to go on. I suppose everyone is, at least a little. But it is always a pleasant diversion to hang out with some of the other musicians and 'jam' for a few minutes to compare fiddles or licks or even just to chat. More





"The Festival encourages people to be more involved with our heritage and gives the town of Asheville a name for the amount of traditional Appalachian music and dance we have here."

— Dancer Loretta Freeman Rice, 2002
Attending and participating in the Festival since the age of 5.




ABOVE TOP: The Mountain Women's String Band and Byard Ray, late 1980s.

ABOVE: (from left) Laura Boosinger and Luke Smathers.
RIGHT: Hominy Valley String Band (from left) Karl Lesta, Grover Sutton, Jim Wolfe, and Jerry Sutton.
Private Collection.

times than not we'll talk about some of the old folks, how they played a song or the tales they used to tell, and that somehow always seems to calm me down. You may find little groups practicing all over the place backstage, in corners and down hallways. In fact, I've found that 'jamming' with all the different groups is uniquely enjoyable every year. Still another fun thing is to play out in the lobby during intermission and breaks with folks I seldom get to play with otherwise. It is a great opportunity to learn new tunes and to fellowship with other pickers. And the crowd seems to love it, too!

Then, after a quick stop at the refreshment table for a cold drink and maybe some home-baked cookies and, before you know it, it's off to the stage. Time for tuning . . . getting a bit more nervous now . . . here is the emcee's introduction . . . almost ready . . . you walk out . . . adjust the mike . . . the brightness of the spotlight hot upon your face . . . the audience a shadowy sea of faces . . . the announcement of the tune you aim to play and where it comes from . . . and then the first calming note sounds and all eyes are upon you. But you almost forget they are there as you lose yourself to the old melody that flows out of you and into the stillness of the auditorium just as it has from countless musicians over the past 75 years. In my mind, I can hear and see the old masters like Grover Sutton, Samantha Bumgarner, Obray Ramsey, and Carroll Best. That is when we realize that we are part of a great sharing of a tradition that is living on through us. Then comes the seemingly thunderous applause that surprises you out of the memories the music has wrapped around you. I guess, in a way, we accept these ovations as representatives for the traditions that we are intent on continuing, here at "America's Original Folk Festival."

As the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival continues to attract visitors from around the world, it is our hope that we, the entertainers, will continue to honor the life long vision of its founder, the 'Minstrel of the Appalachians,' Bascom Lamar Lunsford himself, by presenting this unique musical heritage for generations to come. 





Folk Heritage Committee

Bascom Lamar Lunsford founded the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in 1928 as a means for people to share and understand the beauty and dignity of the Southern Appalachian music and dance traditions passed down through generations in Western North Carolina. Today, the Folk Heritage Committee, a function of the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce Community Betterment Foundation, continues Lunsford's vision and works throughout the year to produce the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival and Shindig on the Green events. This committee consists of fifteen dedicated volunteers who represent a wide range of skills, talents, and generations, and who are all active members of the region's music and dance communities. The mission of the Folk Heritage Committee is to produce the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival and Shindig on the Green series in an effort to support the preservation and continuation of the music and dance heritage of the Southern Appalachian Mountains. All of these individuals have contributed countless hours and are to be commended for their stewardship of these events and the traditions that they represent.

1928 - 2002



MOUNTAIN
DANCE & FOLK
FESTIVAL



2001 – 2002 Folk Heritage Committee Members

Joe Holbert, *Chairman*

Glenn Bannerman

Eva Clontz

P. Lee Dansby

Jackie Grooms

Troy Harrison

Art Horn

Jim Kelley

Judy Miller

Mary Montgomery

Wendy Reynolds

Melanie Rice

Dick Roberts

Jerry Sutton

Don Talley

Advisory Members

Jo Lunsford Herron

Roger Howell

Richard Hurley

Kara Rogers

Folk Heritage Committee Advisor

Leesa D. Sutton

Heritage Development Officer

North Carolina Department of Commerce

Division of Tourism

Acknowledgements

The Folk Heritage Committee gratefully acknowledges its many partners across Western North Carolina and the state. The 75th anniversary celebrations of the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, as well as the 2002 Shindig on the Green season, has been made possible with the support and involvement of those listed below and many others.

Sponsors

CP&L
First Citizens Bank
Mast General Store
Pepsi
Square D

Media Sponsors

WNCW 88.7 fm
WPEK 880 am

Granting Agencies

Asheville Area Arts Council
North Carolina Arts Council
North Carolina Humanities Council

Special Thanks

Blue Ridge Music	Sir Speedy Printing
Graybeard Graphics	Smith Advertising
Jo Lunsford Herron	Susan Rhew Design Inc
Howard Moore	Ann Vasilik



Programming Partners

Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce
Asheville Parks and Recreation
John C. Campbell Folk School
Mountain Heritage Center at Western Carolina University
Pack Place Arts, Education, and Science Center
Southern Appalachian Center at Mars Hill College
Warren Wilson College

Max Woody
Leslie Yancey, Laura Chase,
Vanessa Gaimari, Desiree Callahan,
and the staff of the Asheville
Convention and Visitors Bureau



Folk Heritage Committee

P.O. Box 1010
Asheville, North Carolina
28802

www.folkheritage.org

The Folk Heritage Committee is a function of the the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce Community Betterment Foundation. The Foundation provides fiscal and legal oversight of the Folk Heritage Committee's activities. The Folk Heritage Committee receives no funding from the Chamber or Foundation, and is responsible for raising all funds necessary to produce the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival and Shindig on the Green events. The Community Betterment Foundation is a North Carolina non-profit foundation organized for the purpose of advancing matters of public concern in Asheville and Buncombe County. Contributions to the Folk Heritage Committee are fully tax deductible.

COVER: Bascom Lunsford. Courtesy of
Asheville Chamber of Commerce.
Photography by Bob Lindsay.

