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Developing a Heritage Festival

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Developing a Heritage Festival

Abstract

The remarkable shift in the U.S. from rural to urban life does not come without social consequences. Many of the learned skills and trades associated with farming and rural life are now becoming lost to the majority of the U.S. population. One way of continuing traditional knowledge and skills is by offering hands-on demonstrations through a community heritage festival. This article describes Mississippi's community-based Piney Woods Heritage Festival.

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Introduction

According to Gale (2000), "It is well known that over the past two centuries the United States has evolved from a rural society with almost all the population engaged in farming to a predominantly urban society." This remarkable shift from rural to urban life does not come without social consequences, as many of the learned skills and trades associated with farming and rural life are now becoming lost to the majority of the U.S. population. One way of continuing traditional knowledge and skills is by offering hands-on demonstrations through a community heritage festival.

Recognizing that rural Mississippi's natural and cultural histories were disappearing, a Heritage Planning Committee was formed in southern Mississippi. Initiated and coordinated by county staff of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, the team solicited area residents who had an interest in antiques, cultural organizations, and craft guilds to comprise the committee. For a community-based heritage program, it was deemed important that the local residents develop the content and play an active role of the conduction of the program.

The group researched and visited similar festivals in the region and contacted regional cultural arts organizations for development information. Based upon the information gathered, the committee concluded that it was important to teach today's public about the pioneer skills that earlier generations of Piney Woods people employed. These living traditions are best learned informally by word of mouth, observation, and/or imitation, so a variety of hands-on teaching demonstrations of skills and crafts were deemed to be important (Forbes, 1985). A local native plant arboretum, which had adequate facilities for parking, restroom use, indoor display space, covered outdoor shelter, and utilities, was selected for the festival site.

A search was conducted in the surrounding community to find residents who could display and demonstrate a variety of traditionally handcrafted items and skills. Area church groups and the local radio station were visited to find performers of gospel, bluegrass, and country music forms. For American Indian presentations, a regional Indian Heritage association was contacted for referrals of traditional craftsmen and performers.

Members of the planning committee provided the administration of the event, and the arboretum facility staff and other volunteers provided for admissions, parking, setup, and maintenance needs.

Conducting the Event

At the first Piney Woods Heritage Festival, 35 traditional craftsmen, musicians, and performers volunteered their services for the 2-day event. Organized into three separate areas for the three different themes, demonstrations and performances were presented continuously in each focus area. In the music pavilion, gospel groups, blues and bluegrass bands, country musicians, and storytellers performed. In the American Indian Heritage area, 10 exhibitors provided continuous demonstrations on indigenous crafts and skills. In the traditional crafts area, there were presentations and demonstrations of pioneer life and products. For the children, there were hands-on demonstrations of making wooden toys and an "archaeological dig" (Crosby Arboretum, 1999). Exit surveys were prepared and distributed to attendees following the event.

Evaluation and Results

Over 1,100 people attended the first 2-day event. The exit surveys showed that most of the visitors lived within a 50-mile range of the exhibition, yet the event also attracted visitors from nearby states. The surveys showed an overall high level of satisfaction for the event, and attendees felt "that it was important for these disappearing skills to be presented" (Crosby Arboretum, 1999).

The positive response to this event identified a demand for further programming, and monthly heritage craft workshops were scheduled for the following year. These expanded workshops were well attended and demonstrated the positive impact of the festival in the community. Although the economic benefit was not measured, several local businesses were supportive of sponsoring future heritage festivals.

The Piney Woods Heritage Festival became an annual event held every second weekend in November. Over 90% of the exhibitors, musicians, and craftsmen returned each year for the event and continued to volunteer their time. Since the majority of the presenters were elderly, some were unable to attend subsequent festivals due to health or other reasons. There was a request to create more learning interactions for children, and a free 1-day event for area schools was added to subsequent festivals. Storytelling, square dancing, and craft presentations designed specifically for children have attracted more than 700 schoolchildren annually.

The success of the Piney Woods Heritage Festival has been due to the strong leadership provided by Extension personnel and the organizing committee's ability to find quality and willing local talent. By identifying and inviting area groups with similar interests to serve on the committee, the event was perceived as a community effort instead of a single organization's program.

One problem that occurred after the first festival is that some of the original planning committee did not feel the need to stay involved to help coordinate subsequent festivals. Maintaining involvement by the festival committee may include providing specific roles or duties to members.

Conclusion

A cultural heritage festival can provide the continuance of the cultural traditions and historical knowledge of a community. For a heritage festival to be successful, it is important to have active involvement from local residents, with representatives from a variety of area groups. Involving the community assists in the process to find the right people to conduct programs, to assist or sponsor the event, and to promote the event within the region. Using local talent ensures a good community effort and gives a distinct "sense of place" for historical regional accuracy.

Heritage programs may also be conducted with individual workshops. Ready and willing audiences for these types of programs may be found at senior citizen centers, retirement homes, and elementary schools. Training programs for volunteers in heritage craft making could be established to provide more area instructors and could be organized similar to Extension Master Gardener programs.

Folklife programs are best presented by word of mouth, by observation, or by direct imitation through hands-on demonstrations; rather than formal lectures, brochures, or classes (Forbes, 1985). With each passing year, there is an increasing challenge to find local people who are not only skilled in traditional craft making, but who are able and willing to demonstrate their crafts to the general public. Skilled commercial artisans often attend shows to sell their product, not necessarily to demonstrate their techniques.

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