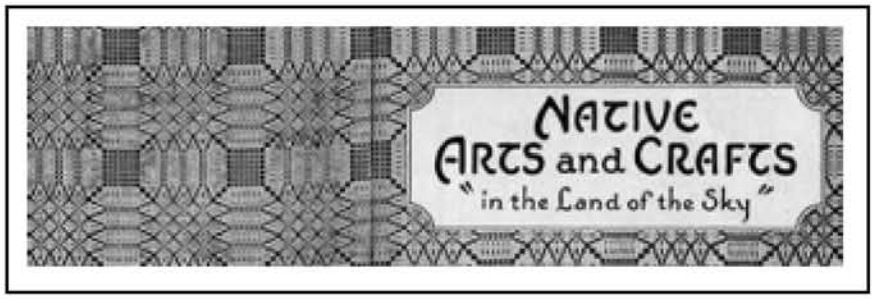

The Folklorist's Digital Toolkit

By M. Anna Fariello

Western Carolina University's Craft Revival project utilizes the latest technology as a preservation tool for documenting a historical regional movement. The primary method used in this project is *digitization*, the making of a digital surrogate from a tangible object or piece of information. This process takes data—a rather impersonal term describing the rich material gathered by folklorists and historians—and converts it into a form of minute numerical digits to be stored, displayed, transferred, and accessed via a computer. Using sophisticated software, this digital surrogate is coded using a controlled and standardized vocabulary. Together, the digital unit—whether made from a photograph, document, material object, sound fragment, or video clip—is mated with informational data to form a searchable record, somewhat like the ones found in the library's card catalog of bygone days. But here the resemblance ends. Digital data is loaded onto a server, recovered via a searchable database, and accessed worldwide from the web.

This article briefly outlines the principles and methods used in a multi-dimensional project centered in western North Carolina. The author hopes to illustrate the role of digital technology as a tool that will increasingly come into play in folklore fieldwork and research. While such contemporary tools don't replace the folklorist's standard kitbag—with tape recorder, camera, and notepad—they do

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provide a way of organizing material gathered in the field to make it accessible for future research and worldwide distribution.

ONTENT: WHAT WAS THE CRAFT REVIVAL?

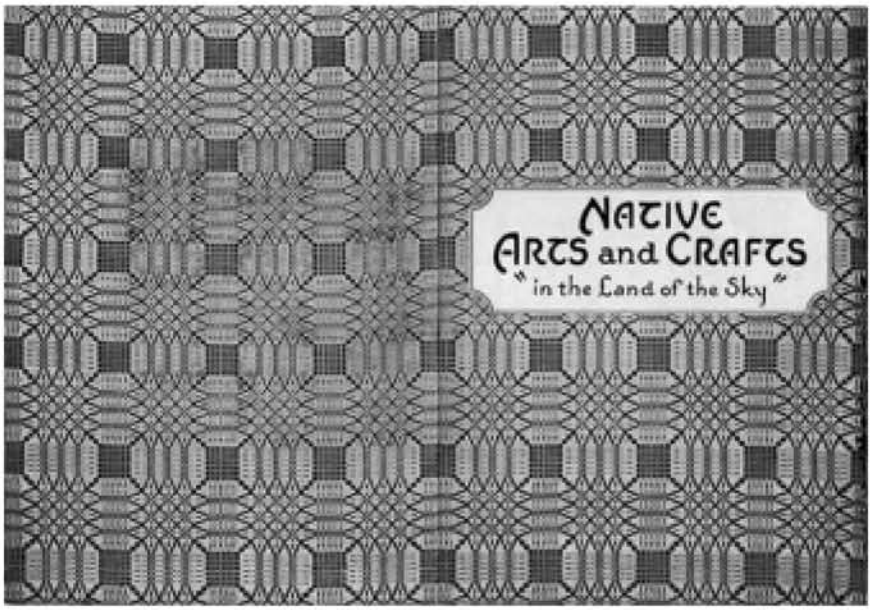
During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mountain craftsmen formed the cornerstone of a revived interest in things handmade to create a movement referred to as the Craft Revival. For the most part, these were not the professional craftsmen of today; rather, they were farmers working during agricultural off periods, mothers making homespun clothing for their families, and local tradesmen providing implements for their communities. They were people who had the talent and ability to make things needed for daily living.

Although the making of handicraft has long been a part of the activities of all peoples, the Craft Revival describes a particular period of time in which this activity was accelerated and attracted national attention. Makers were encouraged to preserve traditional skills and produce work for sale. Craft sales enabled them to upgrade their standard of living, adding the practical—like a washing machine—or the intangible—like a child's education—to their lifestyles. As the revival progressed, craft production became increasingly focused on works for sale. Craftwork, coupled with the growing popularity of mountain tourism, helped to shape the region's economy and culture. Although these craftsmen left few written records of their own, their story survives in samples of their work, in accounts of their sales, and in newspaper clippings celebrating their talent in collections throughout western North Carolina.

PARTNERSHIPS AND TRAINING

Although the activities and products of the historic Craft Revival movement are rooted in tradition, the Craft Revival *project* takes a non-traditional approach to its documentation. Funded by the North Carolina State Library, Western Carolina University's Hunter Library is the lead organization in a state Heritage Partners Grant. Funds for this grant come from a little-known Congressional act, the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA). Passed in 1996, LSTA restructured the federal government's commitment to libraries nationwide, having a positive impact on the work of community preservationists. The act provided funds to enhance access to library services in rural communities and to develop programs that encourage sharing and collaboration among libraries and non-profit collecting institutions. In North Carolina, LSTA funds were used to develop the Heritage

Baskets, traditionally made for gathering and storing, were produced and sold during the Craft Revival. Photograph courtesy of Hunter Library Special Collections, Western Carolina University.



"Native Arts and Crafts" brochure is typical of the types of documents that help define the Craft Revival. Courtesy of the Craft Revival project and the Penland School of Crafts.

Partners Grant program, which fosters collaboration and capacity building among regional organizations. Western Carolina University's Hunter Library received one of only two multi-year grants awarded by the North Carolina State Library.

A wealth of objects, documents, letters, photographs, and oral histories concerning the Craft Revival was scattered throughout the region in the archival repositories of craft schools, museums, and local historical societies. These have never been brought together to create a cohesive and complete story of the Revival and its cumulative impact in shaping Western North Carolina and the state. One of the project's goals is to facilitate the more effective use of widely scattered collections, and to promote a better understanding of the interconnectedness of various craft-related entities. Through partnerships created on its behalf, the project aims for a new understanding of the Craft Revival to emerge through comparisons made across disciplines and institutional boundaries. As part of the project, Hunter Library has identified collections relevant to the Revival and is currently working with the John C. Campbell Folk School, the Penland School of Crafts, the Southern Highland Craft Guild, WCU's Mountain Heritage Center, and Hunter's own Special Collections. Over a three-year period, the project will add additional Heritage Partners.

Moreover, an overriding mandate of the LSTA Heritage Partners Grant is that such projects add to the storehouse of best-practice methods used by small and mid-sized organizations. After contributing images and data to the project, Heritage Partners earn both equipment and software that they can then apply to their own organization's uses. During the run of the project, each partner receives training and back-up technological support from the Hunter Library. Thus, at the end of the three-year project period, participating regional organizations will have new tools and updated skills to apply to the care of their collections.

New Tools for the 21st-Century Preservationist

The digital toolkit of a 21st-century preservationist contains some pretty standard stuff: a computer with the capacity to burn compact disks (CDs), a scanner, scanning software, and a computerized collections management system with a software program capable of linking scanned images with associated documentary data. In the digital world, this associative data is termed *metadata* because it contains data about data, rather than simply information about an object or document. Metadata relies on controlled vocabularies so that search terms are standardized or, at the very least, consistent across the digital collection. Both the project and this paper utilized standards recommended by North Carolina Expressing Cultural Heritage Online (NC ECHO).[1]

The digitization process begins with scanning an item from one of the Heritage Partner's collections. At NC ECHO's suggestion, the project used a three-tier system of digital image surrogates: a *master, access,* and *thumbnail* image. Each surrogate has its own purpose and format. To create a master image, an item is scanned at a high resolution (600 dpi)[2] and saved as a *tiff* file. A *tiff* file has the advantage of being uncompressed, that is, all the data is saved in a raw form. Folklorist's might think of a *tiff* file as an original photograph or tape-recorded interview; it is unedited data, uncut and unaltered. The Craft Revival project uses what are called *gold-on-gold* compact disks for data storage. Although the shelf life of a regular compact disk is two to five years, the manufacturers of gold-on-gold CDs claim they can last up to 300 years. Once a master image is burned onto a CD, it is set aside for preservation.

Working digital files—or access images—are scanned at a lower resolution (300 dpi) and saved as *jpg* files. These images are still print quality, but are compressed to take up less space on a CD or

Master images are scanned at a high resolution without cropping or altering in any way.

Access images are cropped and embedded with a watermark before being saved at a lower resolution, stored in the database, and viewed over the web. Both illustrations are from "Western North Carolina R. R. Scenery: Land of the Sky," a late 19th-century travel guide. Courtesy of Hunter Library Special Collections, Western Carolina University.

in a computer or server's memory. And finally, for use on the web, the image is reformatted and saved yet a third time, this time at 72 dpi. This makes a thumbnail image that is compatible with computer screens and allows for fast loading.

As those of us working on the Craft Revival project quickly learned, the most time consuming part of the project is not the scanning itself, but the creation of the associative data to go with it. This required a significant amount of upfront planning; we first had to create data *fields*—the framework for any computerized collections management system—before data input could begin. Fields were defined and ascribed to a database software program that links the scanned images to the input data.

While the Craft Revival project is using Content dM as its database software, other collection-based projects have used Past Perfect, ReDiscover, or any number of commercial collections management systems. Museums and libraries use these and similar software packages to keep track of collections. All of them work essentially the same way, by linking individual collection records to standardized search terms coded into pre-determined data fields. Together, this forms the core database.

Project staff and partners record units of data that tell a researcher or student-user basic information: who, what, where, and when the original item was made. Adopting data fields suggested by NC ECHO, the project collects data entered as Creator (who made the item), Title (what is it), and Date (when the document or artifact was made). Other fields are designed specifically for the Craft Revival project; for example, items that are associated with a particular locale (County) and with the organization that archives it (Partner). Other project-specific vocabularies included *weaving, pottery,* and *metalwork* (each entered as Subject-Craft Type) or *Brasstown Carvers, Cherokee,* and *Penland Weavers and Potters* (entered as Subject-Group). Finally, there is a free-text block in which the archivist/folklorist enters a full description of the item. All tolled, approximately twenty data fields are used to quantify information about the scanned item. Thus, descriptive search terms are mapped to particular data fields allowing future researchers to search the database from varied perspectives.

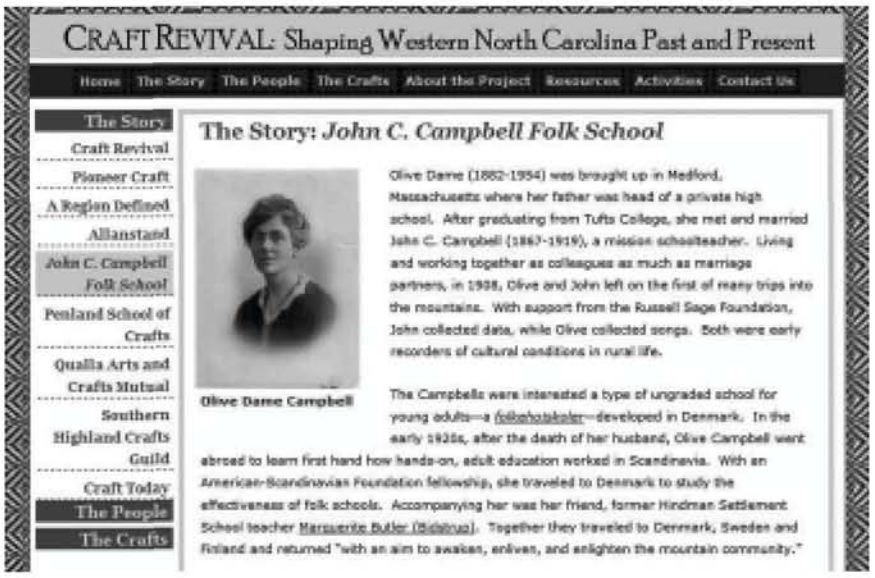
Access: Craft Revival on the Web

The final product of the Craft Revival project is an on-line resource consisting of a multi-page website set in front of the searchable database. The website tells the story of the historic Craft Revival

The website is supported by an expanding database of images that are linked to an individual data record. Photograph courtesy of Mountain Heritage Center at Western Carolina University.

and its impact on western North Carolina, while the database provides primary resource material for anyone wishing to study further. The website includes active links as part of its storyboard. At the click of a mouse, certain highlighted words take the reader from the web-based storyboard to the database itself. There, readers and researchers can browse or search the selected photographs, letters, pamphlets, records, and objects. Couched in an explanation of weaving, for example, are click-able words that take the reader to images of woven items, booklets about weaving, and photographs of weavers.

The *Craft Revival: Shaping Western North Carolina Past and Present* website[3] aims to provide historical grounding for understanding the context of craft promotion and contemporary economic development initiatives, as well as an appreciation of contemporary craft forms. In this way, the project hopes to enhance research and scholarship opportunities by making resources easier to locate and use. Accessed from the website, historic documents and traditional objects can be viewed by independent researchers, professors, and teachers who wish to include regional material in course curricula. The project provides new, accurate, and useful information to outreach



The Craft Revival project website tells the history of each Heritage Partner site. Photograph of Olive Dame Campbell courtesy of the John C. Campbell Folk School and the Craft Revival project.

and marketing communities, to tourism organizations, to local governments and to coordinating groups that operate craft-based economic development initiatives.

Perhaps the most significant goal of the project is to increase awareness of the importance of the Craft Revival to western North Carolina residents and to others across the state. During the revival, North Carolina makers shaped clay, in turn, shaping attitudes and values that contribute to today's appreciation of the handmade object. Makers wove cotton, linen, and wool, weaving a sense of community that today contributes to a regional sense of place. Craftsmen hammered metal, forging partnerships to effect change. Artisans worked with wood and built a regional economy based on individual talent and entrepreneurship. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, these activities reinforced the value of quality, individuality, and workmanship. They remain evident in a 21st-century region that is both dynamic and progressive.

The Craft Revival website can be seen at http://craftrevival.wcu.edu.

NOTES

[1] NC ECHO's mission is to promote the use of digital imaging to broaden and enhance access to North Carolina's cultural heritage. NC ECHO maintains an in-depth website that more fully explains state standards for digitization projects, accessed at *www.ncecho.org*

[2] Resolution refers to the quality of a scan and is measured in dots-per-inch or dpi.

[3] Accessible from *http://craftrevival.wcu.edu* .