



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 56, No. 10

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, OCTOBER 1975

The Community Festival Idea

LIKE EVERY OTHER GOOD IDEA, the proposal to organize a community festival of the arts may seem slightly ridiculous, but many communities are proving that it is possible, pleasurable and profitable.

People are not satisfied in these days to pass time idly. They want to have their minds and imaginations stimulated, and the community festival fills these needs. In a land where all men and women share the material good things in life, it is equally important to their satisfaction in living that they have the opportunity to share in what is beautiful and to have a part in creating it.

The question is: what can your community do in the way of building a festival that will provide entertainment for citizens, including those who participate in it, and visitors. The festival can be a show-case for local musicians, vocalists and dancers. It can present programmes that show what people are doing culturally. It can bring back as entertainers local people who have made successful artistic careers elsewhere.

Someone will ask the question: how highbrow, middle-brow, or lowbrow should a festival be. A community festival should not be addressed to any given part of the population. It should cater to a wide range of people of all ages, highbrow and lowbrow, and their varied interests.

The planning of a festival requires wide support. No group, however enthusiastic and qualified, can make a festival successful if the people in the community are apathetic. A festival must embrace a spirit, a feeling of involvement. It will rekindle the flame of community spirit.

A festival attracts visitors who inject money into the economy, resulting in benefit to the service and hospitality industries, and for this material reason it deserves the support of local business people and the municipal administration. But there is something beyond money-making involved. The festival should strengthen interest in more than mundane things. It should help us to improve the quality of our lives.

What is a festival?

A festival is a time for happiness and rejoicing. To

trace the festivals of the world through all their variations would be to trace the entire history of human religion and human civilization. It is noteworthy that the Greeks, to whom we owe so much of our culture, began building their towns by laying the foundations of a theatre.

Today, Canada has many heavy-weight festivals: at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Charlottetown, Lennoxville, Orford, Quebec, and at Stratford where the Shakespearean Festival had its 23rd season this year. Festival Canada, a month-long exhibition of talent, ranges through opera, ballet, folk singers, drama, orchestra, movies and poetry.

Community festivals are not in that league, but some add noticeably to the gaiety of both spectators and participants, and to the cultural riches of the country.

They may commemorate an historical event, such as the anniversary of the founding of a village or a city. They may be built around the birth-place or home or centre of activity of a famous person — a Stephen Leacock, economist and writer; a Robert Service, poet; a Mrs. Louise McKinney, first woman to be elected to a legislative assembly; a Laura Secord, heroine of the war of 1812; or a Simon Newcomb, world-renowned in mathematics and astronomy.

A festival may stem from the ancestral origins of citizens. For more than eighty years people from thousands of miles away have been drawn to the Icelandic Festival at Gimli, a Manitoba town of 2,000 population. Altona, with about the same population, has drama and other attractions marking the arrival in 1874 of Mennonite settlers.

A festival may be centred upon a specialty of the district or its ethnic culture. For example, the Gaelic Mod at St. Ann's, Cape Breton, has as its centre the only Gaelic college in North America.

Coping with difficulty

Many difficulties will become immediately apparent when your planning begins. You must subscribe to

the validity of Murphy's Law: "If anything can go wrong, it will." There are various sub-divisions listed in the Ontario *Provincial Judges Quarterly* in April 1973: "Nothing is ever as simple as it seems; If you have a foolproof method of trying to please everybody, somebody is not going to like it; If you explain something so clearly that no one can misunderstand it, plenty will."

There will be critics. Bohemia is a state of mind inhabited by people who, whether or not they are creative or particularly intellectual, like to stand on the side-lines and scoff at those who do things.

Some will say that there are no facilities for a festival. A concert hall is a nice thing to have, but a school auditorium or a marquee will serve, and what better setting can there be for a Bach recital than a church?

The Nova Scotia Festival of the Arts started in a tent community on the grounds of the rural high school at Tatamagouche. Its purpose was "to provide a showcase of the things we can do and enable Nova Scotians to see what other Nova Scotians have done with training." There were dance groups and singing groups performing on open-air stages, recitals and singsongs in church and school halls, plays in the school auditorium, and marquees filled with art and museum pieces.

This example emphasizes the fact that it is not necessary to produce an extravaganza with elaborate trimmings. Great wealth of stage scenery and props is not necessary. Shakespeare did not do badly in his time without any. A potted plant might represent a forest and a basin of water the Atlantic Ocean. The chorus introducing act three of *Henry V*, calls upon the audience to use its imagination: "Play with your fancies and eke out our performance with your mind."

Launching a festival

The launching of a festival is not difficult. Collect a group of people you expect will become enthusiastic supporters and workers. Set up a committee to find out the community's resources in the way of historic events and sites. Make a list of beauty and recreation spots: even devoted addicts of opera and symphony require physical diversion. Tabulate the community's resources in the performing arts. Frame a programme, offering either variety or a well-developed specialty. Select a dynamic leader, someone who is accustomed to getting things done. Make sure that your organizing board has representatives of all arts disciplines.

The committees on which these people sit should have room for residents and organizations who reflect all community interests and who get involved in the decision-making and the planning. Young people should be involved from the very beginning, not just to take part in performances but to invent, to explore, to venture into arts old and new. They will produce many lively suggestions.

Talk over proposals with existing arts and crafts

organizations, and with cultural groups and ethnic groups, and with clubs and associations of every kind. Many questions will arise, and no one has a monopoly on the right answers.

Listen to the stories of a local historian or an enthusiastic museum buff so as to gather ideas to make the festival more meaningful locally, but do not get sidetracked from the big objective . . . do not look for a needle when it is really the haystack you want.

Building a programme

Once the framework of the festival has been constructed, groups go to work on their specified tasks, every group establishing its goals and deadlines.

Every group should determine what is involved in the doing of a job, what time and energy will be needed, and assign duties to those most competent to carry them out. The organizer must see the enterprise as a whole and keep a finger on its pulse.

Sparking a festival requires exercise of your imagination to picture and present the sort of events that will give the greatest satisfaction. Imagination is an inventor. It entertains possibilities. You can be creative: having ideas is not a monopoly of a few. And as Anne remarked in her *Green Gables* days: "It's delightful when your imaginations come true."

Think always about the audience you expect to attend the festival. Some people like *King Lear* and others prefer *Peter Pan*. One audience will applaud heartily a juggler who leaps through a ring of knives, while another audience will give an ovation to the singer of a lullaby.

To attract people you must have something special to offer, something that they do not see or hear every day. Your audience is free to attend or to stay away, to sit through the programme or walk out. You must keep them interested.

We all have the urge at times to do something original. If you wish to produce an event that has features differing from other similar events, you need to put your imagination to work. The act of creation does not make something out of nothing; it uncovers, selects, shuffles, combines and synthesizes already existing facts and ideas.

The ability to originate is a very great quality to have. A little originality will add colour and attractiveness to your production. You will give people not only what they want, but something better than they thought they wanted.

Involve local talent

Frame the festival so as to give significant places to local musicians, classical and popular, to ballet and dance groups, to theatre clubs, and to ethnic groups. Encourage local events and workshops.

A community festival anywhere in Canada is not concerned with masterpieces only, but also with

plays and musical compositions that give competent local people a chance to perform.

Every community has musicians, singers, actors, and artists whose presentations will give flavour to a festival. People can go from church to church, enjoying organ and choral recitals. Many towns have madrigal singers, folk, classic, and chant singers. Theatrical groups present a variety of drama, musical comedy, opera and modern plays.

Not everyone is interested in performing before audiences. Many prefer to use their talents in building stage sets, handling publicity, making costumes, directing, or producing. The skills of carpenters, technicians, handy men and women are an intrinsically necessary part of the festival.

Give the Department of National Defence a showcase for its forces. Every community where there is even a small militia detachment has the opportunity to mount a display that will interest spectators. A sunset ceremony is a colourful item, consisting in lowering the national flag, the ancient ceremony of beating retreat, and tattoo.

Communities that are in touch with Indians and Eskimos have at hand a treasury of art testifying to the creativeness of Canada's native people, and a repertoire of sacred and tribal dances and songs. All of the ethnic groups making up Canada's population can add their distinctive cultural contributions.

Communicate your enthusiasm to the many community special groups: church and school orchestras, choirs and drama clubs; and ballet and other dance groups, including those of children. Boy Scouts, Girl Guides and their junior branches, Wolf Cubs and Brownies, have picturesque drills and ceremonies. Universities can provide advisory service and talented students. Hobby associations will set up demonstration booths. Civic-minded groups such as Kiwanis, Daughters of the Empire, Kinsmen, Rotary, Lions, Home and School Associations, the National Council of Women, and the many music and dramatic organizations — all these can be invited to participate in your festival by assisting in administration or by organizing programmes.

If desired, you may look outside the community for some parts of your programme. Provincial arts councils or boards can provide touring dramatic productions and orchestras; arrangements may be made with the National Film Board to show Canadian-made film productions that have won international awards; the aid may be invited of the Canadian Craftsmen's Association, a professional association concerned with the development of fine crafts and quality design; a National Touring Office was opened in Ottawa a couple of years ago to ensure greater access to the performing arts by the widest segment of the public.

Highlight variety

A festival may be devoted to one theme or one type

of music or one type of entertainment, or it may place side by side jazz, chamber music, pop groups, poetry, Gilbert and Sullivan opera, experimental theatre workshops, ethnic folk dance groups, an orchestra, films, exhibitions of paintings, sculpture, ceramics and wood carving. The variety is limited only by the interests of the people in the community.

In art, to compose is to arrange unequal things. As Ruskin advised: "Have one large thing and several smaller things, or one principal thing and several inferior things, and bind them well together."

There may be a solid central programme and several fringe programmes involving many interests and many performers: puppeteers, student film makers, one-act plays, old-time fiddling, talks, discussions, and poetry reading.

Festivals encourage cross-fertilization of the arts. The fine arts are those in which the mind and imagination are chiefly concerned.

In its chapter entitled "The Fine and Lively Arts", written by Walter B. Herbert, formerly Director of The Canada Foundation, the issue of *Canada* marking Canada's Centenary said: "Strict definitions of 'the fine arts' and 'the lively arts', or attempts to establish distinctions between them, are impossible and useless. Often the fine arts are lively, and equally often the lively arts are fine. So, let it be understood that hereafter we are referring to music, painting, drama, literature, the dance, sculpture, architecture, handcrafts, cinema, opera, drawing, engraving, and television broadcasting when reference is made to the cultural pattern."

A festival need not be a giddy whirl, but it needs to be interesting to many sorts of people. It should slay the spirit of solemnity that clouds much of our lives. Mary Renault asks in *The Last of the Wine* "Without laughter, what man of sense could endure either politics or war?"

Humour is medicine for many a trouble, and a dose of laughter is good for most of our ills. It relieves nervous tension and acts as a shock-absorber for the bumps of life.

Programme suggestions

Here, in alphabetical order, are some of the elements of a community festival.

Craft exhibitions. The festival will have exhibitions to show what people do best and like to do in the arts and crafts. Fine arts include tapestry, enamels, work in precious metals, ceramics, weaving, pottery, stained glass, and batiks.

Ruskin remarked in *The True and the Beautiful*: "Any material object which can give us pleasure in the simple contemplation of its outward qualities, without any direct and definite exertion of the intellect, I call in some way, or in some degree, beautiful."

Exhibitions that meet this criterion will include, besides those mentioned, paintings, carving in wood, soapstone and ivory, embroidery, design, sewing,

glass, and leather. There is a wealth of such materials in every community.

Dance. A festival could have traditional, modern square, ballroom, country, folk dancing and ballet. There are fewer ballets than square dances, but both are part of art. Ballet has been a matter of interest in this country only since the 1930's but today there are three or four top-ranking professional companies. They are backed up by many small groups, amateur and semi-professional, and many towns have ballet schools or classes. Public appreciation of ballet is increasing rapidly.

Drama. Community theatre is not a synonym for the gathering place of the cultural elite. It incorporates the talents of many persons, and dramas are being presented successfully by community groups.

A production does not have to be big. There are beauty and satisfaction in little efforts. Young people's drama performances serve to stimulate interest and develop the skills of students in the art of theatre. They encourage new talent, offer a show-case for playwrights, and provide entertainment.

A festival play should have quality. There is no great virtue in a play in which the actors keep tumbling up and down flights of steps, or when the lighting is so artistically done that you cannot see what is going on. As to violence, an unbreakable canon of stagecraft in the great days of Greek tragedy was that violence could not be committed on the stage. Murders had to be committed off stage. Instead of seeing the action, the audience was told about it.

Folk-songs. A group of folk-songs or ballads makes an acceptable break in a programme devoted to other forms of music. There are ballads and ballad poems that are tragic, amusing, romantic; ballads of the sea, of Robin Hood, and of events in history.

Selected Canadian folk-songs were collected by Marius Barbeau with the collaboration of Arthur Lismer and Arthur Bourinot, and published by the National Museum of Canada, in 1947.

Music. There is widespread yearning for more serious musical presentations in addition to crowd-pleasing popular entertainment.

There is great power in music. It pats our heads when we are in sorrow or pain, and it is able to magnify our happiness and joy. When the inexpressible had to be expressed, Shakespeare laid down his pen and called for music.

Music education from the primary grades through to the top reaches of post-graduate study is available in Canada. The Federation of Canadian Music Festivals encourages the study and performance of music at the amateur level. Its graduates include Robert Goulet and Gordon Lightfoot, both of whom got their start singing with Canadian music festivals.

Poetry. Only three or four in a thousand read poetry today, though a couple of generations back

poetry stood in high and universal esteem. Parents used to read poetry to their children, and children recited poetry to their parents and at school concerts.

There is a spreading interest in the reading of poetry aloud in groups. The poet is a manufacturer of images, and auditors at a poetry reading enjoy intense pleasure.

In listening to poetry we are supporting a necessary ingredient of the good life. If we should ever lose completely our feeling for verse, we should at that moment have cut ourselves off from a part of our origins, for we sang and chanted long before we reasoned and persuaded.

Workshops. Finally in this array consider workshops. Teen-agers and young adults seek workshops where they can work out ideas with group participation. A workshop is a seminar, discussion group, or the like, which emphasizes the exchange of ideas and the demonstration and application of techniques, skills, etc.

You may have workshops on legend, costume, cookery, customs, drama, opera, film, jewellery making, and any other hobby or pursuit citizens are interested in.

What is needed

What really matters to a mature person is not merely what he sees with his eyes but what he sees in things with his mind — not just eyesight but insight. He has passed from the immaturity of being attracted, as young children are, to anything that glitters. He seeks subjects and objects that have aesthetic appeal.

Standards of aesthetic taste differ from age to age, from place to place, and from person to person. When we say of a person that he has good taste we mean that he has the facility to receive the greatest possible pleasure from things which he perceives to be good — good in themselves or good because of inspired craftsmanship.

Special interest groups, such as those in music or drama, find their activities pleasing and engrossing. They need to keep in mind this imperative: when they come before the public it is the *public* that must be pleased and satisfied. Good taste will reject anything that is shoddy, grotesque or inartistic. What is offered at a festival must be first-rate in the judgment of the audience.

To be attractive, a festival need not have too much of the carnival spirit. It may be a place of unhurried charm, with time to linger listening to good music and enjoy the civilities of life.

To stage a community festival requires year-round planning, the help of business people, educationists and local organizations, and the services of a dynamic director.

The festival must pay attention to the fitness of things and show respect for the beliefs and customs of the community.