

NORTH CAROLINA STATE FAIR FOLK FESTIVAL HISTORY

BASCOM LAMAR LUNSFORD AND THE ORIGINS OF THE FOLK FESTIVAL

Bascom Lamar Lunsford was born in Mars Hill, North Carolina, in 1882, surrounded by the rich traditions of Appalachian folk music. In 1928, he founded the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, often recognized as the first event to be described as a “Folk Festival.” His goal was to preserve and showcase the music and dance traditions of Southern Appalachia, celebrating the beauty and dignity of the region’s culture.

The festival grew into the oldest gathering of its kind in the nation, highlighting the talents of artists from the Great Smoky and Blue Ridge Mountains. It played a key role in raising awareness of Southern Appalachian culture throughout the region, the nation, and even the world.

Lunsford’s mission was to present the best Appalachian ballad singers, string bands, and square dance teams for both education and entertainment. The festival’s music and dances reflect the diverse heritage of the region, including Scottish, English, Irish, Cherokee, and African influences.

In 1948, Lunsford helped establish the Folk Festival at the North Carolina State Fair, bringing these traditions to an even wider audience.

Gail Lyle, founder of the Little River Cloggers, continued this legacy. She danced with the Eno Valley Cloggers, who performed at the fair in 1977 and 1978. In 1995, Gail started her own team, and the Little River Cloggers have been a fixture at the N.C. State Fair since 1996.

EXPANDING THE FOLK FESTIVAL

While the festival began as a celebration of Southern Appalachian heritage, it has grown over the years to embrace musical and dance traditions from around the world. Today, the Folk Festival highlights heritage music and dance categories representing diverse cultures, from Cajun and Zydeco to Irish step dance, Hispanic folk, and West African drumming.

To reflect evolving artistic expressions, the Performing Arts competitions were added in addition to the Folk Festival. The Performing Arts competitions include divisions that celebrate innovative, creative performances, and dramatic arts, such as:

- 🎵 Fusion genres blending folk with jazz, rock, blues, or electronic music
- 🎵 Experimental dance styles and modern interpretations of traditional forms
- 🎵 Comedic and theatrical performances featuring unique instruments or props
- 🎵 Show Choir/Glee Club

The North Carolina State Fair Folk Festival continues to honor its roots while welcoming new generations of artists and performers, creating a vibrant and inclusive celebration of music, dance, and culture.