The American Folklife Center (AFC) was created by the United States Congress in 1976 to “preserve and present American Folklife.” This was the first time that a federal law established a mandate for the conservation of folk culture in the United States. However, the institutional roots of the Center can be traced to the 1928 founding of the Archive of American Folk-Song in the Library of Congress’s Music Division. That year, the Library invited independent folksong collector Robert Winslow Gordon (1888-1961) to become a “specialist and consultant in the field of Folk Song and Literature.” Gordon was already a devoted collector of American folk music, who traveled extensively throughout the United States recording folksongs with an Edison wax-cylinder machine. He supported himself through teaching, writing, and the occasional grant. Gordon convinced the Library of Congress to establish an Archive of American Folk-Song and appoint him as its director.

Unfortunately, Gordon’s position at the Library ended after a few years when funding faltered. However, the idea of a national folk archive had taken root and it was revived when the Texan folksong collector John A. Lomax (1867-1948) was hired by the Library in 1933. John was assisted by his young son Alan Lomax (1915-2002), who in 1936 became the Archive’s first federally-funded staff member. On behalf of the Library, the younger Lomax undertook ground-breaking collecting expeditions, produced a series of influential documentary albums and radio programs, and recorded legendary performers including jazz musician Jelly Roll Morton and folk singers Lead Belly (Huddie William Ledbetter) and Woody Guthrie. Although initially established to house American music, the Archive’s holdings soon acquired an international scope. (See Ann Hoog’s article in this volume for more information on international collections.)

During the 1930s and 1940s, the Archive received another major infusion of material when John Lomax, Benjamin A. Botkin and others associated with the Library of Congress participated in government-funded economic relief programs associated with Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “New Deal,” such as the Federal Writers’ Project, the Ex-Slave Narrative Project, and the California Folk Music Project. Employing hundreds of researchers and writers, these programs generated tens of thousands of recordings of traditional musicians, as well as interviews with Americans from all walks of life that document American folklore and history.

By the 1940s, the Archive of American-Folk Song had expanded its documentary scope to include folklore, verbal arts, and oral history. Successive heads of the Folk Archive continued the politics and practices established by John and Alan Lomax: lending documentation equipment and supplies, publishing materials from the collections, and encouraging donations of materials from the United States and around the world. Benjamin A. Botkin (1901-1975), who headed the Archive from 1942 until 1945, helped to redefine and broaden the scope of folklore research to include ethnic studies, occupational folklore, and urban folklife. These interests are reflected in the AFC collections of his era. The name of the archive would also eventually change to the Archive of Folk Culture, to reflect this broader mission.

The Library’s Recording Laboratory produced its first releases in the seminal “Folk Music of the United States” series in 1942. New albums based on the Archive’s holdings continued to be offered to the public until the 1980s, first as bound collections of 78 rpm records and then as long-playing, twelve-inch records (LPs). From the 1990s on, CD versions of many of these early recordings, as well as new releases from the Archive’s collections of music from outside the United States, were produced and distributed through agreements with commercial recording companies.
The growing reputation of the Archive following World War II resulted in a flood of requests from private individuals, the media, and publishers, for reference information and other services. Duncan Emrich (1908-1977), head of the Archive of Folk-Song from 1945 until 1955, oversaw a visionary four-year plan for acquiring recordings from all the American states from a new generation of American collectors. He also actively sought to expand the Archive’s foreign holdings. These new recordings came to the Library on the revolutionary and novel (for the time) documentary medium of magnetic audiotape.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the American folk music revival led to increased public interest in traditional culture. The Archive served as a major resource for many performers and scholars seeking tunes, lyrics, and stories; and the collection’s higher visibility resulted in new donations and acquisitions.

Alan Jabbour (1942- ) followed Rae Korson (1901-1991) as head of the Archive in 1969, and was, in turn, succeeded in 1974 by Joseph C. Hickerson (1935- ), who headed the Archive until 1998. Under Hickerson’s leadership, special emphasis was placed on the organization and cataloging of the Archive’s collections, the creation of listening tapes and finding aids to facilitate the research of visiting scholars, and the production and dissemination of additional recordings, including an influential fifteen-album series of topical LPs entitled “Folk Music of America.”

Today, the collections of the American Folklife Center are among the unique treasures of the Library of Congress. The Center’s Archive houses more than four million items of ethnographic documentation that record the folklore and traditional cultural expressions of people living in the United States, as well as throughout the world. The Archive includes unparalleled one-of-a-kind sound recordings (more than 200,000 hours in diverse formats), field notes and other manuscript materials, photographs, videotapes and other visual formats, and ephemera dating from the late nineteenth century through the present day.

The American Folklife Center

The American Folklife Center's Archive is now the largest ethnographic archive in the nation.

Bicentennial celebrations of the United States in 1976; a growing popular and scholarly interest in folk, traditional, and grass-roots culture; and an increased awareness and pride in the ethnic and regional diversity of the American people, contributed to calls for a national center devoted to the preservation and study of folklore. In 1976, the United States Congress passed the American Folklife Preservation Act (Public Law 94-201), which created the American Folklife Center (AFC) at the Library of Congress to “preserve and present American Folklife” through programs of research, scholarship, training, live performances, exhibits, publications, and preservation. As part of the response to this congressional mandate, the Archive of Folk Culture was transferred from the Library’s Music Division to the newly-established American Folklife Center.

In 1976, Alan Jabbour became the first director of the American Folklife Center. In 1977, the Center launched two field documentation projects: the Chicago Ethnic Arts Project and the South-Central Georgia Folklife Project which set the agenda for several major efforts to document and celebrate

Sreevidhya Chandramouli performed traditional Karaikudi vina music at an event sponsored by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress on August 20, 2009. An essay and webcast of this event are available on the AFC website at: http://www.loc.gov/folklife/events/HomegrownArchives/Homegrown2009.html#august20
the folk culture of distinct regions in the U.S.A. In subsequent years, the Center undertook large cultural heritage survey projects in northern Maine; in Lowell, Massachusetts; in rural and urban New Jersey; along the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia and North Carolina; at the New River Gorge, in West Virginia; in Paradise Valley of northern Nevada; and in various other sites throughout the United States.

In addition to these documentation projects, the Center launched the ambitious Federal Cylinder Project in 1979, which copied more than ten thousand wax cylinders and cylinder-based recordings of ethnographic materials dating from the 1890s through the 1930s onto preservation tape. Among these transfer materials are valuable early recordings of the music and lore of Native American communities. In 2000, the Center’s Save Our Sounds audio preservation project continued to set new archival standards by digitally preserving more historically important audio recordings.

In 1999, Peggy A. Bulger (1949- ) succeeded Alan Jabbour as director of the American Folklife Center. In 2002, Michael Taft (1947- ) was appointed head of the AFC Archive, succeeding Joseph Hickerson. Under Bulger’s directorship, several important initiatives were launched: In 2000, the AFC launched the Veterans History Project (VHP) in response to congressional legislation (Public Law 106-380). Congress directed that an oral history collection be established at the Library of Congress honoring the nation’s war veterans “so that future generations will have original sources of information…and may learn of the heroics, tediousness, horrors, and triumphs of war.” To date, the VHP has amassed more than 76,000 interviews.

Other significant recent additions include the donation of over a quarter of a million items (including eight thousand hours of recordings) by the International Storytelling Center of Jonesborough, Tennessee; a collection of eight hundred “Local Legacies” documentation projects from throughout the United States; over 4700 hours of recorded performances and related materials from the National Council for Traditional Arts; tens of thousands of grassroots oral history interviews collected by the national StoryCorps project; and the massive Alan Lomax Collection containing more than ten thousand hours of sound recordings, five thousand moving images, five thousand photographic prints and negatives, and one hundred fifty linear feet of manuscripts.

Since the advent of the World Wide Web, the American Folklife Center has concentrated on presenting its materials in online formats, to reach researchers and listeners more quickly and directly. The Center’s current website (http://www.loc.gov/folklife) features more than two dozen substantial online presentations containing thousands of items; links to over a hundred fifty streaming video webcasts of AFC concerts, lectures, and symposia; the “Traditional Music and Spoken Work Catalog,” a searchable database with bibliographic information on approximately 34,000 ethnographic items, including thousands of sound recordings made between 1933 and 1950; and current and back issues of the Center’s quarterly publication “Folklife Center News.”

Today, the AFC is truly unparalleled as a national support center for public folklorists, as an ethnographic research center, and as the curatorial home to the most comprehensive archive of folk and traditional materials in the United States.

For further information, see:
American Folklife Center, Library of Congress
www.loc.gov
Bibliography of Current and Historic Print Publications of the American Folklife Center:
www.loc.gov/folklife/AFChist/bibliography.html
Published Recordings from the Archive of Folk Culture: www.loc.gov/folklife/rec.html