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Russell Currier, UAF professor comments on the Festival of Native Arts and gives a brief history of the festival

George Henry, interviewer

Jeff Kennedy, moderator

Fairbanks, Alaska

1978

Series: Potlatch series

Jeff Kennedy said this year the Festival of Native Arts takes place on the University of Alaska campus March 14-16.

Old Sitka song

George Henry said Russ Currier was one of the early organizers of the Festival of Native Arts. He asked Russ Currier what is the Festival of Native Arts. Currier said it is an opportunity for artists from various cultural groups in Alaska to demonstrate their arts from carving to dancing in a situation where they can observe each other. This doesn't happen very often. Henry asked how the idea got generated. Currier said two communication instructors and students started talking about having such a multicultural demonstration of arts. It was in 1972 or early 1973. It aroused an interest amongst the people first involved with it. A letter was sent around campus asked other faculty if they were interested in the idea. There were a lot of people that showed up for the first meeting. The entire university was represented. Henry asked about the faculty's direct involvement with the festival. Currier said the faculty members suggested groups that they knew. In addition the first chairman of the festival was a faculty member. Faculty were involved in helping the students to organize the event and in raising funds. Henry asked about the arrangements. Currier said they had the same kinds of arrangements as other events such as transportation. They had performers from the northern and southern parts of Alaska. Some people drove and some flew in. He isn't sure where all the funds came from the first year. There was a grant that was used and he doesn't remember other sources. Henry asked about other problems in the first festival. Currier said one night about thirty people arrived that weren't expected. The dorms were all full so they cleaned out rooms and got them ready for occupancy. Another performer had been invited from the Aleutian Chain and about two days before the festival the performer called up and wanted to know where his ticket was. They had to scramble to get funds for him. Henry asked about the size of the venues. Currier said they were in a room where half of the spectators had to stand. As a result the spectators and performers were very close. He thought this was good. It wasn't a stage extravaganza. They are close and familiar types of arts.

Jeff Kennedy said in the past years the different nights were designated for different types of performances. A favorite Inupiaq group was from Barrow. Their 1977 performance is played.

The King Island Dance “Chasing a rabbit” is performed by the Nome dancers.

Henry asked about goals when the Festival of Native Arts first started. Currier said they started in a hurry. They didn't have stated goals. Their general goals were to provide an opportunity for the people to be together in one place and observe each other's artistic talents. At the same time it allowed the university community to learn something about cultural arts and the Fairbanks community at large. Henry asked if the goals were met. Currier said they were very well realized. They had more people show up than could be contained comfortably. The goals and objectives are now in printed form for incoming committees. He thinks the festival does provide an unusual opportunity to have different cultural groups observe each other. They didn't realize what a benefit it was for the students participating in this type of organizing.

Recorded performance of the Tuksuk Bay Dancers from Nelson Island.