

# Towards a culture of training and curating skills. The Role of Living History Farms

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## Abstract

The history and development of Howell Living History Farm in Mercer County, New Jersey (USA) illustrates how important it is to preserve and value the methods, practices, processes, and craftsmanship that have been accumulated over decades in places like this to ensure their future.

## Résumé

L'histoire de la création et du développement de la Howell Living History Farm dans le comté de Mercer, dans le New Jersey (États-Unis), montre à quel point il est important de préserver et de valoriser pour l'avenir les méthodes, les pratiques, les processus, mais aussi les compétences artisanales qui ont été accumulés au fil des décennies dans des lieux comme celui-ci.

## Kurzfassung

Anhand der Entstehungsgeschichte und Entwicklung von Howell Living History Farm in Mercer County, New Jersey (USA) wird verdeutlicht, wie wichtig es ist, Methoden, Praktiken, Prozesse aber auch handwerkliche Fähigkeiten, die an Orten wie diesen über Jahrzehnte angehäuft worden sind, auch für die Zukunft erhalten und in Wert gesetzt werden müssen.

## Resumen

La historia y el desarrollo de Howell Living History Farm, en el condado de Mercer, Nueva Jersey (EE. UU.), aclara la importancia de preservar y valorar para el futuro los métodos, las prácticas, los procesos y también las habilidades artesanales que se han acumulado a lo largo de décadas en lugares como este.





**Fig. 1** Howell Living History Farm Assistant Director Kevin Watson using Belgian work horses Bill & Jessie and a Syracuse 401 walking plow to give a young visitor a chance to experience farming (Photo: Peter Watson).

For those who use living history to preserve the work, play, stories, traditions, and lifeways of times past, the ability to transfer knowledge and skills from one generation of practitioners to another is of critical importance.

How can we ensure that the living, intangible cultural heritage held in our hands is as safely and comprehensively kept as the material culture that supports and reflects it? Can the historical skills of a farmer, miller, butcher or tailor be collected, registered, curated and preserved like the tools and equipment they use?

The questions are familiar to many in this room – those who work in the fields of living history, experimental archaeology, performing arts and cultural preservation. But the answers remain works in progress as the related challenges emerge.

According to UNESCO, the world's chief historian of heritage that communities recognize as critical to their identity and continuity, "intangible cultural heritage must be relevant to its community, continuously recreated and transmitted from one generation to another." Safeguarding it requires a constant transfer of the knowledge, skills and meaning at its core – something that all good ox drivers, horse teamsters and practitioners of trades, traditions and good businesses know from experience. Replacements are the lifeblood of the future.

I began to understand it personally when, as a mid-1970s Peace Corps volunteer in a West African project to increase protein levels in human diets through improved bovine production, my job was to show farmers how they could use their beef and dairy cattle for tillage and transport operations most often done by hand.



**Fig. 2** Peace Corps Volunteer Joe Howell with Bariba farmers in northern Benin, West Africa, 1975 (Photo: Joseph Howell).

The job included making sure that the work I was doing continued. Both then and now, a big part of the job of every Peace Corps volunteer is to work with local teachers, trainers and in my case, extension agents to develop transition and transfer systems that ensure continuity. Volunteers have two years to do that, and I proved to be not very good at it. It took me nearly three and a half, ... but in all truth, that was because I was learning so much from the farmers I worked with, and about a culture that held so many fascinating, invaluable lessons for me, that I found it hard, and at times even counterproductive, to speed my plow, or the oxen who pulled it.

When I left, I worked in international agriculture for ten years before a friend and former Peace Corps volunteer Dick Rosenberg – a Michigan dairy farmer and the



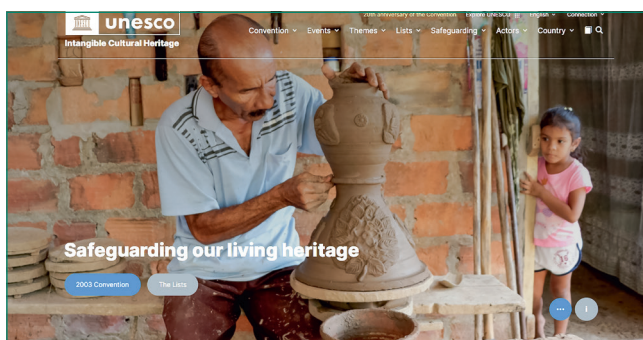


**Fig. 3** Tillers International founder Richard Rosenberg with Lauren Munev of the Association for Living History, Farm & Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM) during the 2023 Haying Field Day of the Midwest Ox Drivers Association (MODA) (Photo: Pete Watson).

founder of Tillers Research International – encouraged me to visit living history farms like Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts, Ross Farm in Nova Scotia, and Iowa Living History Farms in Des Moines, Iowa... to look at yoke designs and fabrication methods that might be of value in a project I was then doing for the US Agency for International Development. He also recommended a visit to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, for a look at their yoke collection. If he had known about the Slovenia Ethnographic Museum and the collection of yokes curated by our good colleague Barbara Sosic, he would have certainly sent me there as well.

ditions of Benin, where I was a Peace Corps volunteer, considered when UNFAO-Project PNUD carved out the gameplan for the animal traction project I was part of? Are those woodworking traditions on the UNESCO World Heritage List of Intangible Culture right now?

To explore that question from the ground up, and thanks to the intuition and advice of the illustrator of a technical manual I was working on, I accepted a temporary position at a new, county-owned living history farm in Titusville, New Jersey, USA. Here, there was someone who had grown up on and worked an all horse powered farm until 1952, and who was ready to put one back together. Halsey Genung, 4th generation NJ farmer, helped me, illustrator Mary Kennington (eventually Watson) and two Rutgers University agriculture students open Howell Living History Farm to the public in 1984. As its donor Inez Howell wished, the farm's purpose was to be a park and cultural facility where "the way of living in its early days could not only be seen but actually tried by the public, especially children: milking a cow, gathering eggs in a homemade basket, helping to shear sheep, carding wool, spinning and weaving...".



**Fig. 4** UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage webpage, section "Livelihoods" (Source: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/home>).

Those visits to Living History Farms and Agricultural Museums led to me to an overwhelming question: Were the collections that I saw – and that there were likely hundreds more of worldwide – ever used to inform the project designs, adaptive research, and field work that I was part of? Were the centuries-old woodworking tra-





**Fig. 5** Each year, 65,000 visitors explore the history and heritage of Howell Farm, a 130-acre farmstead restored to reflect the agriculture and lifestyle of a typical New Jersey (USA) farm of the years 1890-1910 (Photo: Peter Watson).

In her letter dated March 10, 1974, she wrote: "Could volunteers build the way they built in the early days with similar tools? And let the public watch and lend a hand? Older people could teach the young how to sew a fine seam, or find hickory nuts to crack with a stone on the hearth, or find wild herbs for curing the miseries, [...] or just go off fishing with a hickory stick pole."

She ended the letter with an intriguing, compelling and future-determining question: "Now what else can you think of?"

The 'what else' was not for everyone. In the 42 years I've been there, two million people have watched and lent a hand. A third of them are school children who learned about ice harvesting, maple sugaring, sheep shearing, and what it takes to grow crops and raise animals. Only a fraction, but an all important one, participated in the farm's internships in sustainable agriculture. They were from all over the world, and came to study yokes, harnesses, farming and gardening tools, and much more... for farms they were building, or working or dreaming of. They were seen by two million people who had opportunities to hear their stories, help them grow and harvest crops using methods from the past, and see the importance of those methods today.

*Hi everyone at the farm,  
I wish to let you know that am still strong with the memories and experience at the farm while I was an intern during the year 2001 with Rob as my instructor. I am doing well on my farm with skills acquired from the Howell Farm. May God bless you always for the good work (you do). I normally follow you through the farm web, thanks to your web experts. Kindly, my warm regards to all stakeholders of the farm.*

*(Edward Chicati)*

His story is just one of many: inspiring, compelling, and telling of what the past can bring to the future, if we're good enough historians to make it a possibility. I often think about the Ecuadorian farmer who spent a summer with us, learning how to make yokes and bows, to break and train oxen, and to use sickle bar mowers. He and his family sold organic milk to the Hilton Hotel in the capital city of Quito, and they wanted to increase production and sales. The constraint to expansion was forage production. Their farm was in the hills above the city, and was too steep for tractors. His grandfather remembered

that oxen were once used there, but his grandsons couldn't find anyone in the community who remember how. The knowledge of ox use had been lost in less than a single lifetime.

The story begs the question. How can we learn, preserve and share what Halsey Genung and countless others taught and stand to teach us? How can methods, practices, processes and systems painstakingly learned through the mediums we work in – whether living history, experimental archaeology, indoor or outdoor museums, or in the hills outside Quito, Ecuador – be here tomorrow? Halsey died just a year ago and I wrote:

*If you knew Halsey, you know he didn't think there was anything extraordinary about the contributions he made to Howell Farm. His job was to farm the place with horses, and he did it because he loved it, and because he knew how.*

*He had grown up helping his father do what he called teaming -- using horses to do everything from plowing people's gardens, to delivering sand and coal to greenhouses, to making and selling hay from their own fields. They used teams to help with farming and logging operations in the Great Swamp, where according to Halsey they could have made a living pulling trucks out of places where the trucks had no business going. In New Providence where they had their farm, they plowed sidewalks with a V-plow made with hardware forged by Halsey's uncle, a blacksmith and farrier whose shop is still there...ironically, now as a nail salon. They had a delivery route that required leaving home at 2 a.m. to buy vegetables at a market 12 miles away, returning before dawn to do chores before starting the route. Halsey remembered how proud he was the day his father handed him the lines before dozing off on the way through the hills. He drove through the darkness not knowing that he wasn't really driving at all, but getting a lesson from a very good pair of horses.*

*His grandfather had teamed as well, and was one of several farmers hired to dig the basement of the neighboring town's YMCA, where he used a plow and a slip scoop to remove the layers of soil where the foundations would go. Halsey brought the scoop to Howell Farm once, after a hurricane left flood debris in the lane. He pulled it with Blaze & Frank -- the team he depended on for anything, and everything, for nearly 20 years.*

*He wouldn't say much when I'd tell him how instrumental he was in helping the farm survive the process of becoming a public park, or building its future as a place where people could find what the donor, Inez Howell, hoped they would. I'm pretty sure he believed, as she did, that in the history we preserve there are ways of working, and living, that can make a better world.*





**Fig. 6** Kenyan farmer and agricultural extension agent, Edward Chicati, with Howell Farm oxen Bud & Jake during the Farm's "Internship in Sustainable Agriculture" (Photo: Pete Watson).



**Fig. 7** Halsey Genung using a 3-section harrow with Blaze, Pearl and Jake (Photo: Pete Watson).



*Howell Farm couldn't -- and wouldn't -- be a good place to find them, had it not been for Halsey. He was born a hundred years too late according to his mother -- something he liked to talk and laugh about, when there was time for such things. Like when we're waiting to water hot horses, or making the long drive home from a supply trip to Lancaster or a farm with a horse we might buy. Few 'historic farmers' get to do what we had a chance to do: learn firsthand what must often be gleaned from the pages of history books, or collections of photographs, or trial and error, or from how-to videos that live in the clouds.*

About a year ago, an ALHFAM colleague asked me if Howell Farm would host the 2024 ALHFAM Conference. We had done it before, and knew how it would impact the daily farming, maintenance, program, research, and office operations that must happen if peas are to be planted tomorrow. We agreed to because we know that what we have so painstakingly learned over the past 40 years can be lost in a single missed, mistaken, or misinformed passing of the lines, in the failure of a succession plan, or in the realities born of the hands of time.

Our call for proposals is a call for help from people in the fields that nourish us all: agriculture, art, archaeology, education, research, engineering, curatorial science, history and history applied.

Curating Living History: Preserving Skills and Intangible Culture is the theme we'll explore during a two-part conference that will use hands-on training workshops as the inspiration for keynotes, papers and roundtable discussions that engage all participants in the work of strengthening the standards, best practices and professional skills needed to preserve living history's invaluable intangible culture.

Whether you are a curator, interpreter, museum director, or practitioner of a skill presented at a historic site, your contribution is essential to the goal of the conference, which is to share tools, methods, ideas and experiences that can strengthen the preservation of intangible culture. We hope you will consider joining us.

## ADDENDUM

The conference was attended by more than 200 ALHFAM members and guests who participated in a program that included 63 live, hands-on workshops and 22 live and virtual classroom sessions and keynotes. The Conference Proceedings will be published in the fall of 2025 and will include links to videos and oral histories associated with the program.

ALHFAM's searchable archive of its Proceedings and other publications, the ALHFAM Skill & Knowledgebase (ASK), contains more than 4,000 records and will soon give users new and better access to digital information generated at conferences, regional workshops and training programs, and at member sites and partnering history organizations.



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