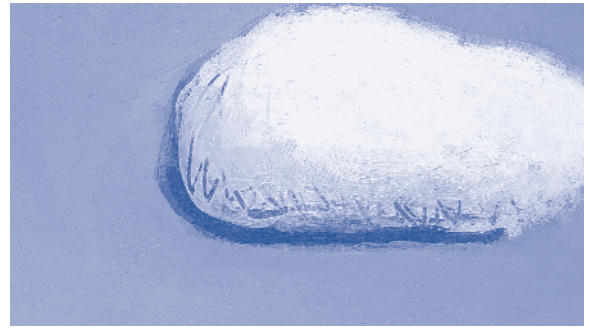


# Art and Culture in an Aging Maine

by Lois Lamdin

Willard J. Hertz



*Lois Lamdin and Willard Hertz, active “retirees” who have chosen to settle in Maine after long and distinguished careers, give an account of the ways in which Maine’s current senior population plays a major role in ensuring the liveliness and durability of Maine’s arts and cultural organizations. They give vivid examples of the four ways that seniors affect the well-being and economic health of these organizations: as volunteers, as financial supporters, as active producers, and as consumers. They note that the most pressing challenge for Maine is to prepare for the inevitable departure of today’s seniors, and wonder whether today’s baby boomers, as they move into their older years, will have the same kinds of commitments to the arts as did their parents and grandparents. *

Well, it's now official. According to figures from the American Community Survey for 2002, Maine has retained its ranking as the seventh oldest state measured by the percentage of its population 65 and over, and is now tied with West Virginia in having the nation's oldest median age of 40.0 (U.S. Census Bureau 2002). Perhaps even more startling is the statistic that every day 3,000 Americans turn 65 while only 1,000 older Americans die. In other words, each day there are 2,000 more Americans over age 65.

Moreover, increasing numbers of them are choosing to move to Maine from other states, adding to the natural growth in the state's own seniors.<sup>1</sup> In the 2000 Census, Maine residents in the age group 65 and over totaled 183,402, or 14.4% of the total population. The 1990 Census figure was only 162,162 or 13.2% of the total. By 2020, nearly one in five Mainers will be over 65.

Add to this the fact that Maine's seniors, as those elsewhere, are living far longer than previous generations. For Americans generally, life expectancy at birth is about eight years longer than it was in 1950, and almost 30 years longer than it was in 1900. Furthermore, among those reaching age 65, the life expectancy is 80 years for men and 84 years for women (National Center for Health Statistics 1999).

While these figures may cause consternation at Blaine House, in the Maine Legislature, and among the state's public and private social-service agencies, the news is not all bad for Maine's world of arts and culture. The fact is that this generation of seniors is changing our perception of how older people live, behave and relate to their communities. They not only are healthier, more active and less dependent physically and financially than their stereotypes would indicate, but they also are more cognitively "with it."

With these characteristics and resources, the senior population in Maine is a major factor in assuring the liveliness and durability of Maine's arts and cultural organizations. In fact, they affect the well-being and economic health of these organizations in four ways—as volunteers, as financial supporters, as active producers, and as consumers. This article takes a look at each of these roles, utilizing several examples to show the diversity and

impact of the seniors' contributions and participation.

### *Seniors as Volunteers*

*Bangor's two National Folk Festivals were Maine's largest community-sponsored cultural events of the past two years. Some 80,000 persons attended the three-day festival on Bangor's riverfront in August 2002, and 100,000 came for the repeat event in August 2003. The 2003 Festival also was a milestone in Maine's effort to develop as a center of "cultural tourism" to complement its vast outdoor attractions. The visitors came from eight foreign countries and at least 47 of the 50 states.*

*The 2003 event was the 65th in the annual series of folk festivals sponsored by the National Council for the Traditional Arts and held in communities around the country. Every three years, a different community is selected. Bangor was the 27th in the series. By one key yardstick, Bangor's was the most successful in that long history: with a population of only 33,200, it far exceeded any previous host community in attracting an audience in proportion to its size.*

*A crucial element in that success was a hard-working corps of 850 volunteers of varying ages. The most valuable component of this group was the 20% who were seniors 65 and older—they brought to their assignments a lifetime of experience and, with their workdays behind them, flexibility in meeting the festival's scheduling needs. They put together press kits and welcome packets, staffed information and vending booths, collected demographic data on festival-goers, welcomed arriving performing artists, and even operated the golf carts that provided inside-the-festival transportation.*

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We know of no statistics on seniors' voluntary service in Maine. However, national figures compiled by Independent Sector (2001), a Washington-based coalition serving private non-profit organizations in all fields, indicate that seniors are usually generous in giving their time. In a national sampling of Americans 21 and older in 2001, the 65 and over age group averaged 7.3 hours of voluntary service per month, compared with the national average of 7.1 hours.

In Maine, a substantial amount of seniors' volunteer work is spent with arts and culture organizations. This service enables them to engage in activities in a creative ambiance, whether they are working behind the scenes, writing checks, serving on boards, advising on management problems, or representing the organizations and its programs to their communities.

Maine is...full of artists and craftsmen who are performing, writing, painting, sculpting and designing long after reaching conventional retirement age.

- *At the Portland Museum of Art, Farnsworth Museum in Rockland, Maine State Museum in Augusta, and other Maine museums, seniors constitute at least 60 per cent of the docents, conducting gallery tours and outreach programs to elderly or disabled persons who cannot get to the museum.*
- *Most of the ushers at such venues as Portland Stage Company, the Portland Symphony Orchestra, the Bangor Symphony, and other theatrical, dance and music performances are retirees.*
- *Seniors are particularly important in Maine's 400 or so community museums, which are generally understaffed and operate on a shoestring.*
- *Seniors constitute most of the readers in the Maine Humanities Council's Born to Read program,*

*which, in day-care and pre-school centers, introduces children to books and the joy of reading.*

In short, thousands of older volunteers are proping up some of our most treasured and economically stressed arts and cultural organizations with their time and labor. The benefits go two ways. Many retirees, struggling with their need to remain relevant and to continue contributing to their communities, have found their *raison d'être* in active involvement in arts and culture through volunteer work with arts and cultural organizations.

### Seniors as Financial Supporters

- *Grand Lake Stream, a community of 150 persons in Washington County known for some of Maine's best fly-fishing and hunting, is also proud of its history in logging, leather and canoe-building. In 1992, the community organized a historical society to house its documents and artifacts, but by 2000, the collection had outgrown its limited space. The society board, consisting mostly of seniors, raised the funds among themselves and from their neighbors to purchase a large farmstead and barn on three acres of land. Fully restored, the new museum opened its doors in July 2002, and in 2003, it welcomed nearly 600 out-of-town visitors.*

Again, we know of no statistics on seniors' financial contributions to arts and cultural organizations in Maine, but we can turn to Independent Sector for national figures attesting to seniors' generosity. In the 2001 survey cited above, the 65 and older age group had a significantly lower household income (\$38,315) than other age groups, but their charitable contributions averaged \$1,718 more than the national average. Put another way, they gave an average of 4.7% of their income, compared with the national average of 3.1% (Independent Sector 2001).

The Maine Community Foundation reports that most of its funds come from people age 60 or over, a rich and much-needed resource for the state. Charitable giving is a way for seniors to keep in

contact with their state and community. Over a lifetime, they have developed a generous pattern of charitable and philanthropic giving, both as individuals and through their business affiliations. Further, with the costs of rearing and educating their children behind them, they now have a larger share of income available for such giving.

The state's arts and cultural organizations are frequent beneficiaries of their generosity, and the organizations often turn to seniors for leadership roles in their fund-raising.

### *Seniors as Active Producers*

- *In a concert career going back to the 1930s, Frank Glazer has performed in some of the world's greatest concert halls and, as a faculty member at the Eastman School in Rochester, he became one of the country's most sought after piano teachers. In the 1970s, Frank and his wife Ruth, a veteran concert manager, began summering at a family farm near Kezar Falls. In 1976, they founded the Saco River Valley Festival in nearby Cornish. The festival is now an annual summer event built around Frank's keyboard skills but also involving leading musicians from all over the country. It has since sponsored 190 concerts, 91 other artistic events and 158 programs for school children.*

*Moreover, in 1980, after settling year-round at the farm, Frank expanded his activity to include serving as musician-in-residence at Bates College, where, at 88, he still gives three or four recitals a year in addition to teaching advanced students at Bates and at home. Frank and Ruth also initiated a chamber music residence at the Portland Museum of Art, a summer institute of chamber music at the University of Southern Maine, and weekly noonday concerts in Portland sponsored by the Portland Conservatory of Music.*

- *Until a year ago, Bertha Voisine, a 90-year-old Acadian woman, was the last practitioner of traditional braided rag-rug making in the St. John Valley, a craft she had learned from her mother as*

*a girl. Now the art is being revived and perpetuated by eight women who are studying with Voisine under the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program of the Maine Arts Commission.*

Since 1990, the commission has awarded 189 grants to master craftsmen to pass on their knowledge and skills to one or more apprentices. The arts and crafts are as varied as Maine's cultures, including Franco-Canadian step dancing and fiddling, native American basket-weaving, snowshoe-making in the north woods, wood carving along the coast, and Cambodian music in Portland. Like Voisine, most of the craftsmen are seniors eager to preserve and perpetuate the traditions they have followed over a lifetime.

"Businessmen retire but not artists," Frank Glazer says, and Maine is indeed full of artists and craftsmen who are performing, writing, painting, sculpting and designing long after reaching conventional retirement age. Some other outstanding examples:

- *Dahlov Ipcar was honored by a one-person show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1939 and, at the age of 86, continues to delight us with her fanciful images of animals.*
- *Neil Welliver, now 74, has made the woods and rocks and waterfalls of Maine his own—and ours.*
- *Robert Indiana, at 75, is continuing to invent new meanings in letters and numbers on canvas.*
- *May Sarton chronicled in her books her life from 60 to 80 and helped women understand what it means to grow old.*
- *Jean Alvord has been a violist in the Portland Symphony since 1966, and, on her 80th birthday, was greeted by "Happy Birthday" sung by a capacity audience at Merrill Auditorium.*
- *Will Barnet, a part-time Mainer, had a one-person show at the Farnsworth Museum last year consisting of works created since his 90th birthday.*
- *J. Fred Woell, an internationally recognized noted jewelry maker and sculptor, has been teaching at*

*the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts since the 1970s, including in the past two years an experimental “mentoring” program for Deer Isle’s children and adults.*

The urge to be creative is also expressed by the large number of seniors who are enrolling in music, art, and writing courses in our colleges, senior colleges, and other sponsored programs. In a national elder-learning survey, 47.2% of those asked why they learn answered, “to engage in creativity” (Lamdin and Fugate 1997, 75). The creative drive—often frustrated by the demands of earning a living, raising a family, and attending to the multiple chores of existence—can have a joyous resurgence late in life, as attested to by older Mainers capturing in water colors the light on the waves at Popham Beach, learning to play the recorder, or writing short stories or memoirs.

The most pressing challenge for Maine is to prepare for the future—for the inevitable departure of today’s seniors from the scene.

- *The Maine College of Art has been welcoming seniors to its continuing education courses for years. This year, in response to demand, it is offering two courses specifically for seniors—on drawing and on collage.*

### **Seniors as Consumers**

- *Public access to the Maine State Archives in Augusta is provided by a room equipped with a battery of computers, each in its own carrel to provide a degree of privacy. At virtually any time of the business day, people are seated at those computers searching for information contained in the archives’ more than 684,000 public records. Last year, the archives received 5,565 information-seekers, three-fourths of whom were senior citizens, typically husband-and-wife couples, researching their family histories.*

The thirst for knowledge is typical of seniors. In the elder-learning survey cited above, 79.7% noted that they learn “For the joy of learning” (Lamdin and Fugate 1997, 75)

Maine librarians have long noticed the number of seniors crowding into the state’s 273 community libraries. With leisure time on their hands and a lifetime of stored-up curiosity, seniors often are voracious readers, re-reading favorite books, reading other books deferred from past years, or expanding their understanding of the contemporary world. To serve this demand, the Maine State Library and its member libraries provide two services of particular benefit to seniors: the Talking Books program, under which some 56,000 titles are distributed on four-track cassettes to the visually impaired or physically handicapped; and large print books, 15,000 titles in all, which are sent directly to eligible individuals and to community libraries for their readers.

However, when it comes to the arts, seniors present something of a dilemma. On the one hand, seniors have become the primary audience for many of the performing arts, and they also are the mainstay of many galleries, museums, literary discussion groups and other arts and culture venues. Go to any chamber music concert, serious theater performance, retrospective art exhibit or literary discussion group, and the proportion of participating seniors is overwhelming.

On the other hand, the very dependence of art organizations on seniors is a matter of considerable concern. The issue is whether today’s baby boomers, as they move into old age, will have the same commitment to the arts as did their parents and grandparents. While the graying of the audience may be wonderful from the perspective of oldsters’ active involvement, it may be a nightmare from the perspective of vice presidents for development involved in long-term planning.

This pessimistic view is borne out by a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) study of age and arts participation from 1982 to 1997. The study found that “older persons attend all the art forms except jazz more often than do younger people of the same education, gender, marital status, income, etc.” (Peterson, Hull, and Kern 2000). Moreover, with the exception of opera, audiences for the performing arts are aging faster than

the average age of the population. In 1982 only the opera audience was older than the entire sample, but by 1997, the audiences for all art forms were older than the sample, with the exception being jazz.

The NEA study makes clear that the aging of arts audiences is more of a problem in some art forms than in others. The future of classical music is particularly critical. Anyone looking down from the balcony at a symphony or chamber music performance must be impressed by the sea of white, gray and bald heads whose halftones form a pleasing or depressing, depending upon your vantage point, chiaroscuro portrait of the state of classical music.

In contrast, museumgoers had the same average age as the entire sample. This has been explained by some as a consequence of the success of museums in turning themselves into the artistic equivalent of shopping malls. As in a mall, museumgoers can come and go at times of their choosing, can look at what they want to look at for as long as they want to look, and can ignore what doesn't interest them. Moreover, they can browse in the gift shop, have a snack in the café, and, in short, be in charge of exactly how much art they are prepared to encounter. If this is the future, then the performing arts have a structural problem.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The relations between today's seniors and Maine's arts and cultural organizations are strong and constructive for both the seniors and the organizations. Improvements can always be made, of course, by expanding opportunities for seniors in their various roles, improving the physical accessibility for seniors of arts and cultural facilities, and sponsoring programs to educate older adults on the rewards of philanthropy across the board. Generally speaking, however, Maine can be proud of the integration of its senior citizens into its rich arts and cultural life.

The most pressing challenge for Maine is to prepare for the future—for the inevitable departure of today's seniors from the scene. Will future generations of seniors take the place of today's seniors in their various roles? We have always assumed that when one generation disappears, the next will step into its

shoes—or roll in on its rubber wheels. But so far, the baby boomers are showing few signs of stepping into the same shoes in Maine's arts and cultural life.

We have informally surveyed a number of our own older friends—people who spent their parental years feeding their children balanced meals, consulting Dr. Spock to cope with their physical and psychological woes, and dragging them on Saturdays to plays and museums and art galleries. We asked, “Do your children (now married and rearing children of their own) attend classical music concerts and art events? Do they take their own children to these? If not, why not?”

The interviewees, often apologetic, gave mostly negative replies. No, their children (in their 40s and 50s) do not seem to be interested in going to concerts but would attend plays if the parents bought their tickets. Those who wished to excuse their children of being “acultural” suggested that perhaps ticket prices were too high. When asked if the price of tickets had stopped their own concertgoing 30 years earlier, they admitted that while it wasn't always financially easy, they had scrimped to buy balcony seats.

In the long run, the future of the arts in Maine may be more dependent than we would like on the future of arts education in the public schools. If budgetary concerns are to deprive youngsters of the opportunity to sing in a chorus, perform in a play, learn to play an instrument or handle water colors or acrylic paints, we can hardly expect them to grow up with



**Lois Lamdin, 76**, taught writing and Jewish-American and Victorian literature at Carnegie-Mellon University and was professor of English and Dean at Empire State College-SUNY. Since moving to Maine in 1992, she has written and consulted in adult and nontraditional postsecondary education. Her interest in the evolving roles of older adults has led her to write *Elderlearning: New Frontier in an Aging Society* (1997), to serve as chair of the Quality of Life task force in Governor Angus King's Retirement Advisory Council, and to give lectures and workshops in the New England area on positive aging.



**Willard J. Hertz, 79**, settled in Maine in 1992 after 35 years of grantmaking at the Ford Foundation and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, serving the latter as senior vice president. He served for six years on the Maine Arts Commission, and represented the commission on the Maine Cultural Affairs Council. He is on the board of a number of music organizations in Portland, and served as a member of Quality of Life task force in Governor Angus King's Retirement Advisory Council.

an interest, let alone a commitment, to the arts. The Learning Results standards have been articulated for the arts, but throughout Maine many teachers are complaining that there is neither room in the curriculum nor appropriate persons to provide content to achieve those Learning Results.

There are, of course, many other reasons, equally compelling, for fully integrating the arts into the school curriculum, but that is a subject for another article. 🐟

## ENDNOTES

- I. The newcomers may be more of an economic asset than a liability. Those who can afford to move either shortly before or after retirement are disproportionately affluent, pay taxes while not sending children to our schools, and usually carry adequate health insurance.

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