

Meet the People, Know the Program

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Boots and awards line the walls at Patrickus' shop

In Missouri, we are fortunate to have a strong network of professional folklorists that we rely upon to serve on panels, to conduct evaluations and to advise us with new projects. Dr. Wolford, who earned his PhD in Folklore at Indiana University, is a key member of that network. An urban anthropologist, Wolford teaches folklore, oral history and anthropology courses at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and has recently retired from the Missouri Historical Society.

The first time I ever heard of the Missouri Folk Arts Program (MFAP), I was a doctoral student in folklore at Indiana University. Missouri's program was famous for helping communities develop folk arts projects and for publicly recognizing the state's folk artists. Names of the Missouri folk arts leaders at the time—Rusty Marshall, Amy Skillman, Julie Youmans, Dana Everts-Boehm—were names that all public sector folklorists in the nation knew. I wanted to be part of that, so, in 1993, I contacted Dana, then-director, as soon as I arrived in Missouri and asked what I could do.

I suppose one of the reasons the MFAP excelled was that the staff took offers of help when qualified people came forward. Dana asked me to serve on some grants panels right away, and I was honored to accompany her for a site visit to Native American regalia maker Evelyn Voelker in St. Louis back in the early 1990s. Whenever I had the opportunity to teach a course in folklore at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, I made sure the class became aware of the MFAP, its projects and publications. My point to my class, which is a point that everyone should know anyway, is that there is no better way to understand people—whether they are part of a state, a neighborhood, a company, an organization, a family—than by understanding how they express themselves. Folk art, broadly conceived, is what is produced when a person expresses himself or herself as a member of a group.

Over the years, I have continued as a panelist with the MFAP. When I served on the Missouri Arts Council's folk arts grant panel, I made an effort to go to some of the community festivals that the panel evaluated, such as the Raintree Arts Council's Homegrown Arts Festival in Clarksville, Mo. Seeing a community come together through the arts, and knowing that I helped make it happen, was gratifying.

In the last couple of years, I have stepped up my efforts to volunteer my time to the MFAP. My service on the 2005 National Endowment for the Arts' Folk Arts Panel made me realize how much Missouri artists had to offer. The applications from all over the nation were, of course, superb, but I couldn't help but think that Missouri communities and artists could easily equal any of them. I contacted Lisa Higgins and Deborah Bailey, telling them I would do anything I could for them. All they needed to do was ask. Since then I have served on more MFAP panels, attended more events (a favorite is the Old Time Music Ozark Heritage Festival each June in West Plains, Mo.), and conducted more site visits, which are particularly important evaluation and assessment tools for the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program (TAAP).

In 2006, I visited Linda Hickman and her two apprentices, Cindy Collins and Ann Prater, at *Maifest* in Hermann, Mo., where they were demonstrating *klöppelei*. Linda's husband Ed was also there, a quiet partner who crafted some bobbins and made carrying cases for this rare East German form of bobbin lace making. He was sitting with them *klöppeling*, making a bookmark. While I stood there talking to Linda and her apprentices, passers-by could not help but stop and look at the amazing pieces of lace. Linda stayed busy, her hands buzzing around her work as she calmly talked and laughed and demonstrated. She took it up, I came



Prater's fingers and bobbins fly at German festival

to learn, because TAAP master artist Christa Robbins enthralled Linda while demonstrating *klöppelei* at a festival some years before. Linda herself became an apprentice to Christa in TAAP and now spreads the gospel, so to speak, by teaching apprentices and giving countless community demonstrations. This, I thought, is exactly what folklore is—people within a community transmitting their traditions to one another, and doing so because it is so perfectly meaningful to them.

Noted folklorist Simon Bronner, in *Chain Carvers: Old Men Crafting Meaning* (Lexington, University Press of KY, 1985), documented men who, he asserted, engaged in whittling wooden chains not because they had any commercial value, but because the activity itself brought back memories of growing up in communities long gone. Whittling was the artistic equivalent of comfort food, or of Proust’s *madeleine*. That, I recognized, was what Linda and her friends/apprentices were doing—crafting meaning and confirming community through their work. As I continued to observe at *Maifest*, one little girl came up and worked on one of the demonstration pieces. She squealed with delight at her own confusion and success. Yes, I grinned, the transmission continues.



During the summer of 2007, I had the distinct pleasure of chauffeuring Deb Bailey to site visits, after she suffered an injury which prevented her from driving and lifting the heavy cameras and tape recorder she uses to document TAAP artists. So, we visited Joe Patrickus (a fifth generation bootmaker) and Steve Mino near the Lake of the Ozarks in Camdenton, Mo., Ed Harper (a third generation blacksmith) and Matthew Burnett up north in Browning, Mo., and Octavio Nieto (a third generation Mexican dancer) and Martha Amezcua here in St. Louis, Mo. These trips were pure pleasure for me. What surprised me, even more than the sheer artistry, was how each of these artists so easily opened up to me, an outsider and a stranger.

Amezcua swirls her skirt during lessons with Nieto

We spent all day in Joe’s shop, where he stacks exotic leathers in cubbyholes and hangs historic shoe lasts from the ceiling. Finished boots line tables and shelves, while Steve tooled leather pieces and showed us his designs. At Ed Harper’s blacksmith shop, Matthew Burnett exhibited his blacksmithing techniques and then worked on the magnificent wrought iron headboard he was making. In St. Louis, I went to the International Institute to observe Martha fluidly dance her Pre-Hispanic, Chihuahuan, and Jalisco dances with Octavio, the master.



Harper helps Burnett hammer scrolls

The masters are, of course, amazing, in their artistry and their teaching skills. What I have found remarkable in the apprentices is the dedication each one has to learning the traditions, whether they are teenagers like Martha or Matthew, or an adult with a full-time job, like Steve. Through some mechanism—family, community, personal aesthetic, something—they each have absorbed the sense of fulfillment that personal creativity arising out of community provides—not just creativity, but creativity *arising out of community*. I have no doubt that all of the apprentices I observed are stronger in their sense of community as well as in their artistic traditions, and that their communities will benefit from their artistic involvement.

As a panelist, I know the TAAP master artists are true masters in their art, each chosen through an arduous adjudication process. When I sat on the most recent TAAP panel, each of the twenty-four applicants were highly qualified and more than eligible for inclusion. Limiting the final selection to only ten was one of the most painful professional experiences I have ever had. In my opinion, the Missouri Folk Arts Program remains a leader in the country. Serving as panelist, site evaluator, and professor, I hope to promote this remarkable program for years to come and to assist it in communicating to its public what a resource and a treasure the folk artists of this state are. Recently, I successfully proposed a course at the University of Missouri-St. Louis on Missouri Folk Arts, where I will bring TAAP artists into the classroom and introduce students to the folk arts in the metro region and beyond.

Photos courtesy of John Wolford

Folk Arts Exhibitions

February 3–March 10

Work is Art and Art is Work: The Art of Hand-crafted Instruments
A traveling exhibit sponsored by the NEA American Masterpieces Initiative and the Missouri Arts Council
Wood Place Public Library
501 South Oak Street
California, Mo.

March 25–April 30

Work is Art and Art is Work: The Art of Hand-crafted Instruments
A traveling exhibit sponsored by the NEA American Masterpieces Initiative and the Missouri Arts Council
Livingston County Library
405 Locust Street
Chillicothe, Mo.

June 2008

Work is Art and Art is Work: The Art of Hand-crafted Instruments
A traveling exhibit sponsored by the NEA American Masterpieces Initiative and the Missouri Arts Council
Ozark National Scenic Riverways Park
Van Buren, Mo.
(dates TBD, check website for details)
<http://maa.missouri.edu/mfap/calendar.html>