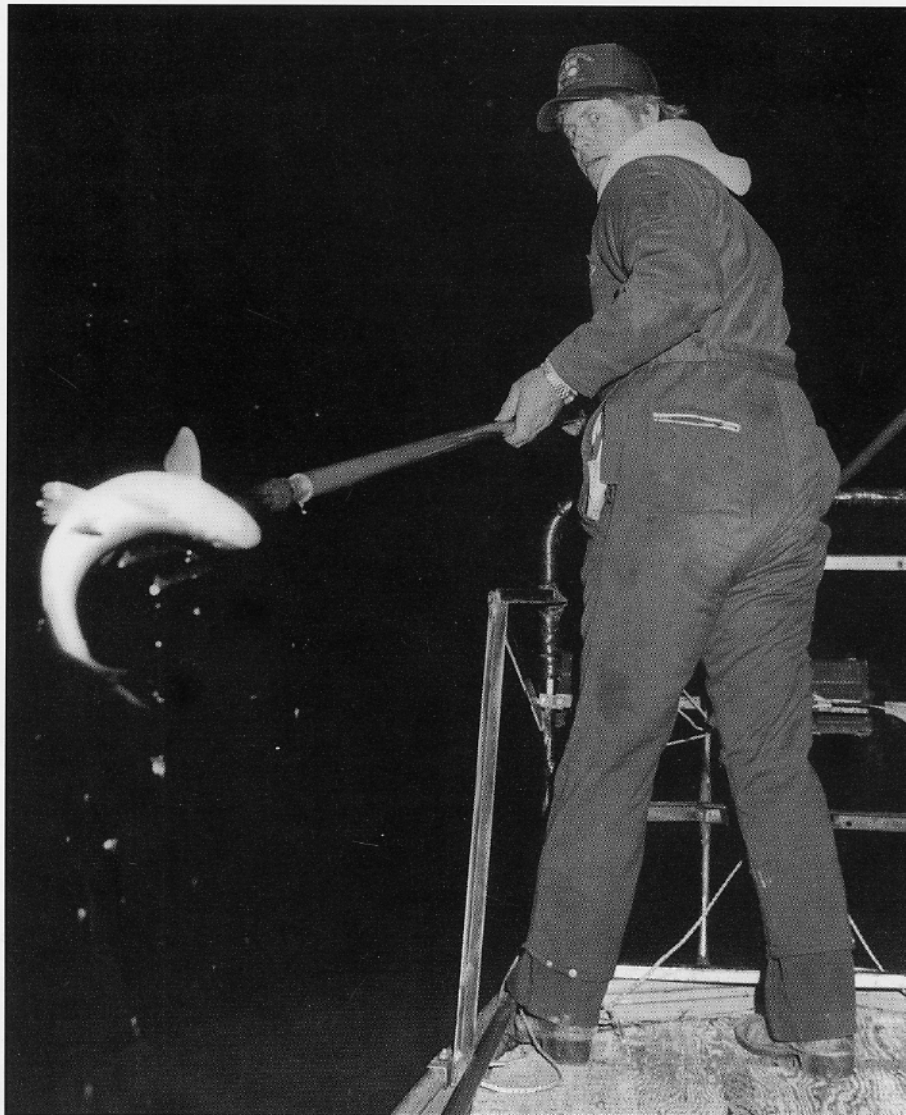


MISSOURI  
MASTERS  
AND  
THEIR TRADITIONAL ARTS

**“Buildin’ Boats, Giggin’ and Foolin’ Around is All Fun:”**  
**Traditional Material Culture of the Ozark Waterways**  
*Featuring Johnboat Builder Cecil Murray and Gigmaker Paul Martin*



D a n a   E v e r t s - B o e h m  
Missouri Folk Arts Program  
of the Missouri Arts Council  
University of Missouri-Columbia  
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# Introduction

The clear running rivers and streams of the Missouri Ozarks have offered sustenance, transportation and recreation to the inhabitants of this region from the days of the earliest Native American settlements up to the present time. Appalachian settlers coming to the Ozarks over a century ago brought with them extensive knowledge of waterway crafts and lore that were modified to fit this new environment. Two interrelated forms of traditional river culture to emerge as enduring symbols of Ozark regional identity are the wooden johnboat and the practice of spear-fishing or gigging, which branched out in Missouri to include bow and arrow gigging.

Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program has worked, to date, with several master artists whose knowledge and skills emerge from Ozarks riverlore and material culture dating at least as far back as the early nineteenth century. Van Buren johnboat builder Don Foerster<sup>1</sup>, Doniphan johnboat builder Cecil Murray, Doniphan paddle maker Ernest Murray, and, most recently, gigmaker Paul Martin of Bunker are among the dwindling number of modern day Ozarks river specialists who refuse to believe their crafts and perspectives are obsolete.

The popularity of gigging and boating continues to grow while the number of artisans who actually make wooden johnboats and hand forged gigs is shrinking. Factory made gigs and metal boats (often equipped with massive motors) are replacing the elegant, hand crafted items, which — though widely regarded as superior — are thought to be too expensive or too difficult to maintain. The craftsmen themselves, however, have their own views on the subject as to why the forged gig and the hand made wooden johnboat are still viable today. This is their story.

## The Ozark Johnboat

In his article on bow and arrow fishing entitled "Bowin' and Spikin' in the Jillikins," archaeologist James Price of Naylor writes that Appalachian settlers began populating the Ozarks in the early part of the last century:

Most were of Scots-Irish descent. Settling first in Pennsylvania, they migrated after the Revolutionary War into the Appalachian South. In 1803 the United States acquired the Ozarks region as part of the Louisiana Purchase and many settlers came to this new land where they could continue to practice their efficient traditions of subsistence and self reliance. By the Civil War the Ozarks hills were dominated by these peoples of Appalachia.<sup>2</sup>

The new Ozark settlers quickly learned to adapt their Appalachian skills of subsistence farming, hunting, fishing, and boating to their new environment. They depended greatly on the plentiful creeks, streams and rivers for both

transportation and food. Viable roads did not intrude into the area until well into the twentieth century, and old-timers still recall floating johnboats downstream to pick up supplies and push-poling them back upstream. Given this situation, it is not surprising that this developing regional culture devised a boat that was particularly well-adapted to the fast running and rather treacherous rivers and streams in this area. Narrowed and lengthened from its regional cousins elsewhere in the Mississippi drainage area<sup>3</sup>, the Ozark wooden johnboat eventually reached, in some places, lengths of 26 to 30 feet, with almost incredibly narrow widths of only 2 to 3 feet. Johnboat builder Cecil Murray of Doniphan explains why



Master boatbuilder Cecil Murray of Doniphan stands next to one of his twenty-six foot long wooden johnboats on the Current River.

his great uncle, John Murray, kept building the boats longer and longer:

See the twenty-six foot, reason he got to building them boats longer, because they handle better. The longer they are the straighter they'll stay. They'd go through a whirlpool and one end of it'd be on one side of it, one on the other and it wouldn't turn around. Polin' them things upriver — take two of them push paddles, one guy in front, one in the back, both of you givin' 'em a stroke at the same time, and that old boat'll just slide for a long ways.<sup>4</sup>

The demise of popularity of the wooden johnboat has already been

### Cover Photo

Lynn Pursifull, an employee of Intercounty Electric Cooperative, gigs a fish from a johnboat on the Big Piney River. Photo by Jim McCarty, January, 1992

discussed at length in an earlier publication in this series (see: Everts-Boehm, *The Ozark Johnboat: It's History, Form and Functions*, 1991). Suffice it to say here that, because of a variety of factors, wooden johnboats have been almost totally eclipsed in the region by an assortment of aluminum replicas, canoes, and motorboats which are cheaper, easier to maintain, and better adapted to high speed motors. Interestingly, however, wooden johnboats are still preferred by many local guides and rivermen, especially now that local builders have figured out how to outfit them with motors. Wooden johnboats float better than metal boats and glide easily over shallow shoals, where metal boats would flounder. They are sturdier, thus safer for gigging, which requires the gigger to stand upright on the boat while thrusting sixteen foot long poles into the water. Cecil Murray points out that the greater length of wooden johnboats also enhances the catch for giggers:

And I'll tell you something — why they made those old boats so long. I've giggered out of 'em many a time. You can turn that boat sideways and float down the river sideways — you got twenty-six feet there for the fish to go around. With that boat floatin' down there crossways through the river, and you got two guys on each side of that light, I mean you got a lot better chance of gettin' a fish. I mean you just think about it. With one of them little boats they use now, them old fish can get away.

These last points illustrate the intimate functional link between johnboats and gigging. That gigging has remained so popular in the Ozarks — in spite of the fact that its been restricted to an off-season (late September through mid January, 12 noon to 12 midnight) and rough fish (as opposed to game fish) — this fact means that there is still an important functional niche for wooden johnboats in the region.

## Gigging in the Ozarks

A gig is a steel object in the shape of a fork or trident, having from two to six prongs, that is attached to a pole or arrow shaft. Gigging is the practice of using gigs to impale fish (and sometimes small game on land). This approach to catching fish owes its popularity in this region to the fact



A hand-forged river gig made by Paul Martin of Bunker

that people were, until quite recently in fact, dependent on fish as a major source of protein. Gigging happens to be an extremely efficient way of catching a large quantity of fish. Paul Martin, a master gigmaker/gigger from Bunker, describes how successful skilled giggers can be:

Soon as it gets dark you can kill a big mess of fish. You can go out there and kill twenty-five or thirty, and start cooking. Then another crew'll go out, see. And they'll come back with twenty-five or thirty.<sup>5</sup>

Gigger Swiney Rayfield of Shannon County, who was interviewed by OzarksWatch in 1990, clearly identifies the primary purpose of gigging as subsistence rather than recreation:

We fish to put food on the table. If a trout fisherman, say, catches a small mouth bass on a fly, that's trash to him. But to a gigger, there's no trash fish. He will kill about anything and eat about anything that lives in the river. Gigging is meat fishing.<sup>6</sup>

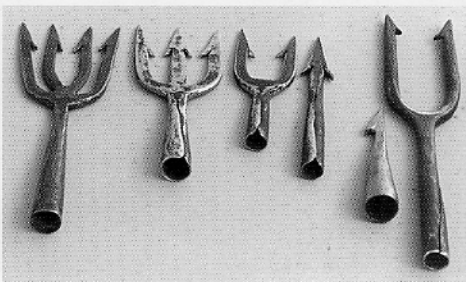
Writing about gigging for Rural Missouri, Jim McCarty notes, "The practice of gigging is nearly

as old as the Ozark Mountains."<sup>7</sup> There is some question, in fact, about the origins of this style of catching fish. The term "gigging" is familiar to many people throughout Appalachia and the upland south, although there the common practice is to gig frogs and small game on land. Folklorist Brent Cantrell of the Tennessee Overhill Heritage Association reports:

Gigging was big when I was a kid around these parts. Frog gigging was a major occupation for teenagers, using a three pronged trident-like contraption which you could buy. Gigging for frogs is still a big deal. You buy a little two to three inch wide trident head, attach it to a wooden pole or, nowadays, a PVC pipe.<sup>8</sup>

Roby Cogswell, a folklorist with the Tennessee Arts Commission, has seen fish gigs in a museum in northern Tennessee but thinks that using gigs to fish is no longer common. He agrees with Cantrell that frog gigging remains quite popular and is done with factory made tridents; both were unaware of anyone who forges hand-made gigs in their state.<sup>9</sup>

This information suggests that gigging was probably introduced to the Ozarks by Appalachian settlers. The shorter Appalachian frog gigs were lengthened to twelve to sixteen foot river gigs (also called "pitch gigs" because they are sometimes pitched or thrown), and their major function switched from catching frogs and small game on



Various shapes and sizes of gigs in Ray Joe Hasting's collection. The collection is on display at the Current River Heritage Museum, 101 Washington St., Doniphan, Missouri.

land to catching fish in the water. Creek gigs, five to six feet in length, were adapted for use in creeks or shallow water. Yet a third development, which may be unique to southern Missouri, was to attach smaller gigs (either in the familiar trident shape, or simply a spike shape) to arrow shafts about 26" to 34" in length. These arrow shafts were generally carved from "suckers" — second-growth branches coming out of hickory stumps — as well as ash, cane, and pine. They were then shot at fish from a special bow.

In researching the topic for his article, "Bowin' and Spikin' in th' Jillikins," archaeologist James Price finds no evidence that bow and arrow fishing originated in Appalachia. He theorizes that this type of fishing is indigenous to certain parts of the southeastern Missouri Ozarks. Archaeological evidence suggests that this practice and material culture may have been adopted from the Shawnee or Delaware Indians during their residency in the area in the 1820's. He writes:

A large rolled sheet iron projective point has been archaeologically recovered from a Shawnee site on the Jack's Fork and a tanged spike was similarly recovered from an 1830's Euro-American refuse pit on the upper Current River in Shannon County.<sup>10</sup>

Ray Joe Hastings of Doniphan, currently an apprentice gig-maker with Paul Martin, postulates that bow gigs began as simple spikes and were later elaborated to two or three-pronged gigs that "made it easier to hit and kill the fish. Multiple prongs also made it easier to hold the bigger fish." If Price's idea is correct, that arrow spikes were borrowed from the Shawnee, perhaps the innovative technique

of attaching a modified, smaller version of a river or creek gig to an arrow shaft represents a kind of syncretism of Appalachian and Native American technology. In any case, by the 1950's there were many varieties of bow gigs in Ripley County. Hastings writes:

We liked the two prong bow gig. Others liked the single spike best, while some chose the three prong. There were a few who used a four prong. On Fourche Creek some of the boys used a strip of inner tube instead of the bow to shoot the arrow shaft with. At least one family in the Pratt area shot fish with bow and spike from a boat.<sup>11</sup> Whatever its origins, "bowin'



Examples of bow gigs made by Ernest Murray of Doniphan

and spikin'" remained a popular technique for fishing and hunting small game well into the twentieth century. Price writes:

In this century the Great Depression witnessed a major increase in the use of bows and arrows as hunting devices since there was little or no money to buy firearms. This practice, despite game laws, continued as late as the 1950s.<sup>12</sup>

Hastings recalls going "bow giggin'," as his family called it, in the 1950s:

We always tried to get down to where we were going to start about an hour before dark. The bows were laid in the water, weighted down with a rock to keep them underwater to soak. This kept them from breaking when strung. The shafts were placed in the gigs and put underwater to swell in order to keep the gig from coming off. We used a one mantle Coleman lantern filled with white gas. I would usually have

to hold the light first; Dad and my cousin had seniority. We would sometimes wade downstream and then back upstream, usually killing more fish coming back up than when we waded down. We would pull the fish off the gig and place it in a towsack that Dad always carried around his waist. The lower part of the sack would be underwater, keeping the fish wet and alive. When we had enough fish, we stopped gigging and went home. The fish were divided up equally, or sometimes a fish fry was set for the next day.<sup>13</sup>

Price points out that "bowin' and spikin'" — like river gigging with poles — was not as easy as it looked:

It took considerable skill and experience to hit a fish with an arrow since, due to refraction, the fish was not actually located where its image appeared in the water. One had to judge in the depth of the fish below the surface and its distance from the archer. Aim had to be taken under the image of the fish in order for the arrow to take a direct route to the actual location of the fish.<sup>14</sup>

Because "bowin' and spikin'" or "bow giggin'," once mastered, was such an effective method of catch-



Cecil Murray demonstrates how to use a bow gig (both bow and arrow gig were made by his uncle, Ernest Murray.)

ing fish — game fish as well as “rough” fish — it was outlawed by the mid 1930’s. By then tourism had started to become important in the Ozarks, and the laws reflect a growing concern for limiting local harvests of game fish so that the fishing would be good enough to entice tourists. No doubt there remain a few diehard archers who continue to surreptitiously practice this art; Ray Joe Hastings recalls hearing about a man in Reynolds County being arrested for bow gigging as recently as 1992. But, on the whole, the practice has all but disappeared, as Ray Joe Hastings notes rather sadly:

The sixties saw the end of fishing with the bow and spike. We didn’t know on that hot June day back in 1954 that this would be our last bow giggin’ trip down Briar Creek. When we got home, we carefully wrapped the wire around the bows and spikes and Dad put them overhead in the smokehouse. It was over; an era had passed.<sup>15</sup>

A less successful effort had also been made by the Conservation Department to ban river or pole gigging. Rayfield explains:

In the early days of the Conservation Department (begun in 1937), they closed gigging down altogether. Said it was disruptive to the game fish, what with gigging bass, walleyes, and the like. Then we formed a giggers association in Shannon and Reynolds Counties. But the fly fishermen and bait casters outvoted us pretty bad; said if we had to have a season, let it be January, February, and March! Well, we finally got the last three months of the calendar year. Now we have the last two weeks in September, too. The noon to midnight time is so we won’t disturb the early morning fishing of the bass and trout folks.<sup>16</sup>

The fact that gigging has been legally relegated to nighttime in the fall and winter has not daunted Ozark natives. Giggers Paul Martin and Cecil Murray laughingly describe their gig poles getting

covered with ice. In fact it is increasingly common to bring one’s entire family — grandparents, children, wives, and dogs — to the sandbar to partake in a late night feast of fried fish, hushpuppies, and pork and beans. This distinctively regional form of fishing has, if anything, become more popular than ever in recent times. Cecil Murray comments:

It’s real popular. It’s a big thing, man yeah, it’s a big thing.

Rayfield describes how gigging has become a major festive occasion for Ozark natives:

People plan big on this every year in the fall. It’s a seasonal event. Used to be the ones who lived on the river were the ones who fished. Now with good roads, trailers and boat motors, people cover a lot more territory. It’s common to gather on a gravel bar at midnight, clean the fish, roll them in cornmeal, drop them into a gas-fired cooker of hot fat. Break out some beer and socialize. But it (gigging as a major social event) was real uncommon in the past.<sup>17</sup>

When I interviewed gig-maker Paul Bunker and his apprentice Ray Joe Hastings about this, to my mind, rather amazing custom, they obviously pitied me for never having participated:

Paul: We have a fish fry right there in the middle of the night.

Dana: The middle of the night? In the winter?

Paul: You mean you never been on anything like that?

Dana: No!

Paul: Well, you’ll have to go sometime! We usually take a bunch of stuff with us like coleslaw, cornmeal...

Ray Joe: Always pork and beans, white bread.

Dana: You actually fry the fish right in the middle of the night like that?

Paul: Yeah! Every-

body sits up and eats. Maybe some of the kids go to sleep.

Ray Joe: There’s an old saying, fish can taste no better than right after you kill ‘em.

Paul: That’s right — we eat ‘em fresh. You put about, oh usually about four or five gallons of grease in the fish cooker. And then you just clean your fish like you want him, then just take him and drop him in there. In a minute and a half, two minutes, he’s done!

Ray Joe: You roll him in cornmeal first.

Paul: Then we make hush puppies, fried potatoes, and everything right in the grease.

Ray Joe: This girl hasn’t lived yet, has she?

Paul: (In agreement) Hmm mmm!

Ray Joe: We got to get her out of that city!

Dana: (Defensively) Well, I have had catfish!

Cecil Murray gives a similarly enthusiastic account of his own family’s gigging traditions:

We used to do that every Christmas, on Christmas night. We’d go up to Deer Lodge and build a big fire on the bank and when you got cold they’d take you to the bank and somebody else’d take over while you warmed up. And Dad would wait to gig cold because the fish when it gets cold will be down in deep water.



Employees of Intercounty Electric Cooperative go gigging together on the Big Piney one cold winter night. Photo by Jim McCarty, January, 1992

And he'd put a weight on that gig so you could throw it deeper. You'd gig till two o'clock in the night and fry fish while the rest of them are giggin'. You just have a big party out there, you know.

Since those Christmases spent with his father, Cecil has continued to take his family out on cold winter nights for fish fries:

I fry all the fish and hush puppies, that's my job. Usually by the time I get done fryin' fish I probably got all the eatin' I want to eat! I got to sample it, you know! I usually clean 'em, too, me and the boys. It's a big job. That son-in-law of mine and that boy of mine, they both know how to do it. One of us'll scale 'em while the other takes the rib bones out and scores 'em. We just hop in there. It's a big job but it don't take so long to knock out forty, fifty head. These grandkids of mine, they're fish eaters!

Because most gigging takes place at night — "Fish stirrs of a night, see," as Cecil Murray points out — giggers have to figure out ways to outfit their boats with lights. Shannon County native Swiney Rayfield describes the "fire jack," one approach to lighting up the river depths at night:

We called it "fire fishing." When I was a boy, we used pine torches. We split pine, tie it into torches, with all that resin. We'd put a fire jack in the middle of the boat, put clay mud down. For the jack, take an old worn out wagon wheel rim to make a circle about sixteen inches in diameter. You'd have two of those. Then stand those torches up, anchored in the jacks. You'd light your torches and float the boat downstream crossways of the current to give maximum light ahead of you. Pole the boat, have three or four giggers along, haul in those shoaling suckers.<sup>18</sup>

Paul Martin and Ray Joe Hastings comment on some of the various approaches that are used for light:

Paul: We called it fire jack. That stuff would burn three to four feet high in the air. I know how to make the fire jack.

Ray Joe: They also had what's called

a fire basket, one about two foot across the top, built out of steel straps, and they put pine knots in that and they hung that over the boat.

Paul: (Gestures to an object next to his shop) And, uh, that was the old giggin' light right over there — that's what they called a pot burner. You can see in twenty feet of water with that. Me and John Cooley made that back in '48, welded that tank up.

That's a home made tank. It's a giggin' light, a pot burner.

Ray Joe: What did it burn?

Paul: Stove gas, white gas. It give a better light. We use electric lights now.

Ozark natives consider gigging to be their sport, their heritage. And, in fact, it appears that few outsiders — tourists or newcomers alike — have attempted to master this approach to fishing. Perhaps the less than idyllic gigging season hinders their interest; or perhaps it's the humble nature of the intended catch (rough fish — that is, bottom runners such as carp, red horse, drum, various kinds of suckers.) The skill, too, is difficult to acquire unless one starts in childhood. Swiney Rayfield comments:

It takes lots of practice, like any skill. Boys may spend a lot of time gigging. Few adults would fish enough to get the hang of it. There are so many adjustments to make for balance, boat movement, fish movement, current, and refraction. You can't think of all of those things at once. It has to be automatic. Newcomers will take a gig, cast it a few times, then sit down and are content to watch.<sup>19</sup>

Cecil Murray recalls with pride what a skilled gigger his father was:

Dad was good at the gig, I'll never be as good as he was. He could throw a gig and hit a drum that was runnin' on the shoal. I've seen him do it. We'd just be ready to just idle the

boat upstream and a drum taken up through there and I've seen him throw that gig and it'd have a string on it, hit the drum with it and pull it back.<sup>20</sup>

While some giggers like Cecil Murray's father will actually throw or "pitch" the pole at a fish, the more common method is to stand above the fish and thrust the gig down into it. Swiney Rayfield again:

Some people throw a gig to death, with that heavy pole. Spread the prongs in every direction. I don't gig like that. I don't break gigs. I swing it till I line up with the fish, then just punch it. Bottom running fish congregate in the big, deep holes of water. We put the gig way down in the water, then punch 'em! You have to allow for the movements of the current and the boat, lead a fish if he's running and compensate for the refraction of the water. A novice tends to gig behind and above the fish, because the refraction tricks him.<sup>21</sup>

Gigging can be a dangerous enterprise. Taking an unexpected plunge into the icy depths is a common occupational hazard:

Ray Joe: Everybody's fell in the water at some time or other.

Paul: One time with Big Bob Lee, we was on the Big Piney. I kept trying to turn the boat to gig, push it back around upstream, and he was a' talkin' to another guy that was in the boat with him, wasn't paying any attention to whichaway I was trying



Master gigmaker Paul Martin and apprentice Ray Joe Hastings outside of Mr. Martin's home in Bunker, Missouri. Mr. Martin is holding a river gig. Note the length of the pole.

to go, and we hit a rock that threw me right out on my head! It don't take much to throw you out of the boat. And the worst thing you can do is to be standing there and look up for the moon. And you see that moon, turn your head back down, you'll go right out on your head.

Ray Joe: You don't ever want to look up, that's right, cause it'll make you fall out of the boat. You'll lose your equilibrium.

Paul: Get the staggers.

Ray Joe: I know a guy that told a guy to do that one time. Just on that purpose. And the guy did fall out.

Paul: Yeah! Nine times out of ten you will!

Falling into the freezing river in the middle of night in the middle of winter is no laughing matter — unless you happen to be from the Ozarks! Judging from my admittedly limited observations, practical jokes resulting in near-death experiences seem to be favorite anecdotal themes in these parts, yielding amusement and laughter for years to come after the fact. And the one who fell in laughs just as hard as everyone else.

## Gigmaking

Paul Martin of Bunker comes from a long line of blacksmiths, going back to his great-grandfather, who Paul remembers only by the name "Grandpap:"

Grandpap! That's what I always heard him called. I think that's even what's on his tombstone, is "Grandpap." He worked in a blacksmith shop way back then, on the farm. My dad, he was raised in that blacksmith shop. That was my dad that made the gigs, and his grandfather. His dad's father.

Paul learned blacksmith skills and how to forge gigs by watching and helping his father. And, like his father, he used these skills to

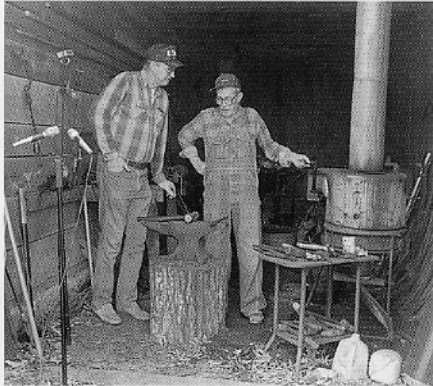
augment his meager income from working in the timber industry:

Dad worked in timber all his life.

Whenever I was just a little bitty tad, he walked fourteen miles and had to wade the Current River.

Didn't make no difference how cold it was or how deep the snow was, he waded that river. He got paid ninety-nine cents a day. Ninety-nine cents. And you didn't get no cash.

They'd just give you a slip, how much you had comin' at the end of



(left to right) Ray Joe Hastings and Paul Martin at Mr. Martin's forge in Bunker.

Paul Martin heats up the gig in the forge

The process of making a four pronged gig is illustrated here. From the collection of Ray Joe Hastings

Meeting the local demand for hand-forged gigs thus constituted a significant part of Paul Martin's livelihood. He recalls:

Back whenever I was in the first part of my forties, I'd make two gigs a day. And I got twenty dollars apiece for 'em, that was good money back then. And now, I wouldn't make one at all for nobody for less than forty dollars.

Apart from the economic incentive, Paul Martin obviously takes great pride in his craft, from which



the week, take that to the company store. They'd give you groceries. That's what I'd call a rough life. That forge that he had kept us kids from starving. There was a lot of times we sat down to the table, there was nothing but a little bitty corn bread and gravy. But we're still alive.

I'm the father of nine kids. And that forge fed my family. The government'd have us shut off in the woods, wouldn't let us work. Anytime I was off work, I worked on that forge there. Like on the weekends, instead of me going to church or going off loafing somewheres like a lot of people do now, I was working. You raise nine kids, you had to have some money coming from somewhere. And I didn't put back a dime. Only thing I own is that old van sittin' there. This house is a rental house. I don't own nothing.

he clearly derives a sense of artistic satisfaction. He takes no short cuts, preferring to make gigs the way his father and great-grandfather made them. Paul's apprentice, Ray Joe

Hastings of Doniphan, describes Paul's gigs with great admiration:

There's very few that's being made like Paul makes them. See, the easiest thing in splittin' this out with a chisel, would be a band saw, metal saw, cut down through that real fast. But he's been doing it the old fashioned way and that's what I want to learn. He knows what he's doing.

Paul Martin and Ray Joe Hastings describe the method of making a gig, from start to finish:

Ray Joe: You need good quality steel such as spring steel, twenty, thirty, forty years old is best. You use pieces from old automobiles, pick-ups. The newer kind has impurities — it's a problem to find good quality steel.

Paul: You take that piece of spring steel and you get it hot...

Ray Joe: You cut the piece of steel



Hammering out the socket



Master and apprentice admire the nearly finished gig

to size, heat it to a red hot glow in the forge. Paul: And you start cuttin' it with a coal chisel. I cut it on out the old way, I don't use no torches, no welders. And I cut it out with the hammer and coal chisel and hammer it out and draw it out and make it all in one piece. No welding in it anywhere.

Ray Joe: Using a coal chisel you split the stock or piece that you heated and cut out the prongs with a chisel. It's a long process. You have to keep inserting it into the forge and reheating it.

Paul: The main thing is having your steel the right heat. It's got to be heated just right. Or otherwise if you get it too hot, you just break it off. As long as it's a good hot red, why, you know you can work it. And if it's a white, huh uh!

After the prongs are cut out, the outer two are formed first. Then they are folded back to give the gig-maker enough room to work on forming the inner two. Small points called "beards" are added near the ends of the prongs to hook and hold the fish:

Ray Joe: You have to form the beards down towards the end of the



Forming the socket on top of an old car axel

prongs, which are hooks about 1" or 1 1/4" down from the point. You can either cut these with the chisel or fold the point back and weld it to make the beard.

After the prongs are formed, the gig-maker works on shaping the socket, where the gig is fitted onto the pole:

Ray Joe: The socket, also called the ferrule, has to

be hammered out into a fan shape and repeatedly heated until it's thin enough so it won't be too heavy. The old fashioned way to do it is by rolling the socket over. It takes a long time to work it all out.

In hammering out the sockets, Paul Martin still uses the same ball piping hammer his father and great-grandfather used. Hammering out and rolling the socket is, indeed, a long arduous process, and Paul imposes exacting standards on himself:

Paul: (holding up the socket) I can make that hold water. It's tightened up together with that hammer

enough to hold water.

Ray Joe: Isn't that pretty? But he ain't through yet.

Paul then places the heated, red hot socket on top of an old car axel with a point on it to further shape it. He talks as he works:

Paul: That socket is going right down on top of that in a minute. That's what you call rounding it, spreading it.

Dana: It never sticks on there? Ray Joe: No. I thought it would. Comes right off. Now he's gonna spread the beards out on it.

Straighten it up. When he gets through with it, it'll be pretty!

Paul: Everything will be set to match whenever I get through with it. All the prongs, beard and socket, all this good stuff.

Once the gig is fully formed and fine-tuned so that its shape is just right, Paul holds it against the grinder to smooth and shine it to a bright silver, and he files down any rough spots. Ray Joe notes:

Now the more perfect you get this, the better you get it, the less grinding and filing you have to do on it. I have a lot more grinding and filing to do than Paul does.

The finished gig truly is a work of art, elegantly formed, perfectly symmetrical, built to last. A buyer generally specifies the size and shape he wishes — whether it's to be a large river gig or a smaller creek gig, whether he prefers three or four prongs, and so on. Gigs vary in size from delicate arrow gigs, to "root" gigs made small so the gigger can take fish hiding in rocks and plants<sup>21</sup>, to intermediate creek gigs, to large river gigs which can be up to six inches wide with six inch prongs<sup>22</sup>. A gig is generally bought independent of its pole; the buyer himself affixes the pole to the gig.

In his lifetime Paul Martin estimates he has made about 3,000 gigs. Recently, however, he has stopped making them for sale because of failing health. Ray Joe Hastings visited Mr. Martin off



and on for over a year, in an effort to encourage him to pass this valuable traditional skill down to him through the Apprenticeship Program. In the end, it was the artist's honorarium that won over the master artist:

I'll tell you the truth about it, the only reason I'm doin' this is to pay for my funeral bill. Exactly what I'm doin' it for. Otherwise I wouldn't be doin' it.

Most people nowadays rely on factory made gigs, but the demand for the hand forged item is still quite high. Unfortunately, there are few blacksmiths left who are willing to spend the time and energy do make them the way Paul Martin makes them. Martin's gigs are coveted because experienced giggers realize that the traditional method yields stronger gigs that last longer, work better — and look nicer. Paul notes:

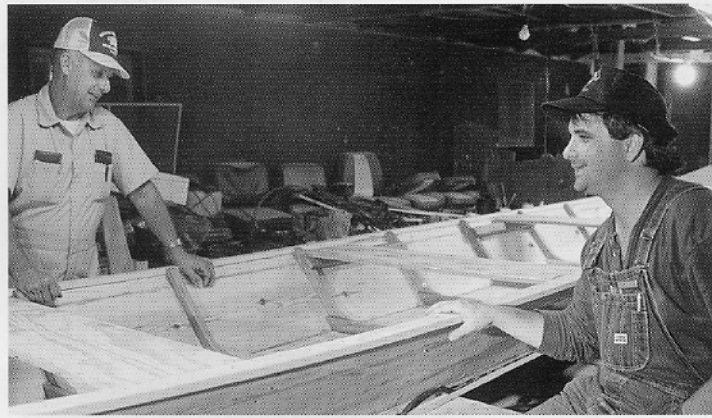
I've turned down, I betcha I've turned down a hundred this year.

For me to make. I couldn't make 'em. There's nobody that knows how to make 'em now.

Ray Joe Hastings is hoping to remedy that situation. He says, I knew when I seen him making one I wanted him to show me. I wanted to learn from him. And see, I learned a little!

## Wooden Johnboats, Hand forged Gigs and Giggling in the Twenty-first Century

As suggested earlier, there exists a symbiotic relationship between wooden johnboats, hand forged gigs and giggling. Wooden johnboats, while on the wane, are still recognized by many as the best kind of boat for giggling. However, there are just a handful of wooden boat builders left, and the fact of



Cecil Murray (left) and first apprentice Steve Cookson take a break while working on a wooden johnboat for the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program.

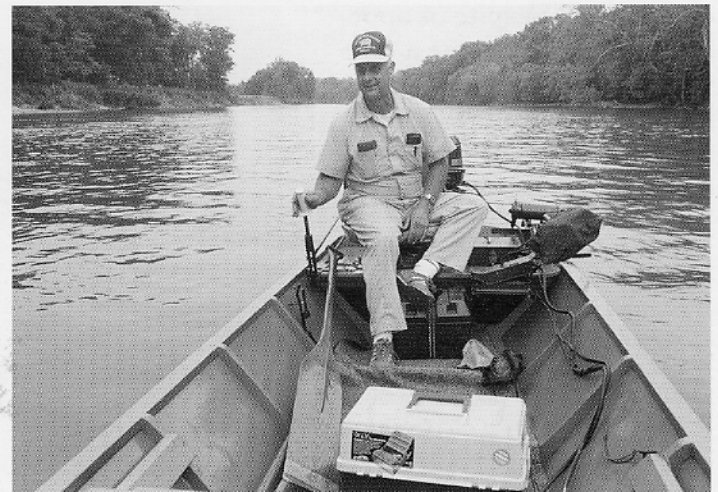
the matter is, there is not at this point a high demand for them. Hand forged gigs, widely regarded as the best sort of gig, are still in demand although there are few blacksmiths in the area who still make them. The practice of giggling is actually on the rise in popularity. Taken as a whole, what does this situation suggest for the future of these distinctive regional Ozark river crafts and customs?

Johnboat builder Cecil Murray of Doniphan is a sort of a visionary when it comes to the topic of johnboats and their continued viability in this modern age. While remaining true to the basic model of the craft inherited from his great-uncle John Murray (after whom, he says, the Doniphan johnboat is named), he has followed the lead of his wife's great uncle Andrew MacDowell who, along with his father Ed Murray, introduced the local innovation of attaching a motor to the johnboat. Since that time, Cecil Murray has labored long and

hard to devise innovations that meet the demands of modern boaters, while keeping the integrity of the traditional form intact.

In order to attach a motor to the johnboat, the form — specifically the degree of rake on both ends — has had to be modified, so that the motor can actually reach down into the water! Cecil has gone further and invented a lever that can yank the motor entirely up out of the water, allowing the boat to glide over shallow areas. Another innovation is to build the entire boat with treated plywood, so that it won't rot. Cecil explains:

That's one reason we're trying to come out with this boat with treated lumber. We got a lazy generation. They don't want to take care of



Steering his wooden johnboat through waters of the Current River, Cecil Murray uses a specially designed lever to pull the motor up out of the water while going over shallow shoals. Note boat paddle by his side made by Uncle Ernest Murray.

anything. Okay...to have a wooden boat like the old ones we built that wasn't treated, you got to take care of 'em. You got to keep 'em cleaned out, keep 'em painted. You know what people want to do, they go and they buy them a boat, they fish with it all summer, they pull it under a shade tree and let it sit all winter, it gets full of water and leaves, then spring comes, and...Well, you can't do a wooden boat that way. I mean, it'll rot on you. But if I come out with this treated lumber and build a complete treated boat...that people can pull out there and sit under a shade tree and let it get full of water and it won't rot on them, they'll start usin' those things.

Cecil is convinced that, once these questions of maintenance and longevity are resolved, people will gravitate back to wooden johnboats:

'Cause they like 'em, they're quiet! And you can run a ten horse motor on a twenty-six foot wooden boat with six people in it, I guarantee you. You ain't gonna win a race, no! But you can sight see and ride and talk to each other while you're going, cause you ain't making a lot of noise.

The fact that it takes much less horsepower to push a wooden boat, as opposed to a metal boat, upstream is, in Cecil's opinion, another selling point. Cecil feels certain that, in spite of opposition, there will come a time when horsepower on the lower portion of the Current river will be restricted. He comments:

I been worried a long time. When the traffic goes gettin' on the river, and them big two hundred horse jet boats are rippin' 'em down — shoal runners, you know what I'm talkin' about — man, I mean, they churn up that old river. They just keep it tore up all the time. How could a fish make him a bed, like they used to have along them old weed banks, they just had bed after bed. How could they spawn and them eggs

stay undisturbed in that bed with them big old boats just knockin' that water three foot up on the bank back and forth? I mean we all talk about it. And, uh, like my cousin Willard Murray said, said, "Cecil," he said, "Well, times is changin'," he said, "and people are having fun." And I said, "I know they're havin' fun," I said, "but they're doin' a lot of damage while they're havin' it." If we don't take care of the river, we ain't gonna have no river.

Another reason to limit the horsepower is safety:

I tell you why, it's because people are gonna do that to themselves. I don't know how in the world it's kept from somebody gettin' killed down here, but there's somebody hurt bad every year in a wreck down here. Somebody'll get killed one of

these days.

Opposition to limiting the horsepower is, Cecil thinks, partially based on lack of awareness of the alternative offered by the wooden johnboat:

I know a lot of 'em wouldn't like it at all. One guy put an ad in the paper, he said, "I wouldn't even be able to go up the river if they cut the horsepower down to the limits they're wanting to cut it to because," he said, "I wouldn't have enough power to push my family up the river." Well, he *wouldn't* in a metal boat. But he would if he had a wooden boat.

A major attribute favoring the wooden johnboat over any other kind of boat in the area is, of course, the fact that it is safer and better adapted for gigging. And, in spite of his concern about declining game fish populations, Cecil is all in favor of gigging: It don't hurt the river a bit. That's just rough fish is all you can gig. And them things, they're just as thickly populated in the river, they need to get thinned out. In fact they open the gigging season earlier and go a little bit longer with it now to try to thin them out.

In anticipation of the day when the demand for wooden johnboats increases, Cecil Murray has trained, to date, four apprentices in the art of building these boats through the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program: Steve Cookson, son-in-law Mitchell Lee Sorrell, and cousins Jon and Wesley Murray. Before training these young men Cecil was himself the only active johnboat builder in Doniphan. Cecil Murray's uncle, the multi-talented Ernest Murray, has also participated in the Apprenticeship Program, training Steve Cookson to make hand carved johnboat paddles (which, in spite of motors, are still a necessary item).

Ernest Murray also happens to be one of the most highly es-



Ernest Murray poses with one of his hand carved johnboat push paddles, outside of nephew Cecil's boat shop

teemed gigmakers of his generation, and both Cecil Murray and Ray Joe Hastings prize the gigs they own made by Uncle Ernest.

(Ernest Murray, in his day, has also made violins, duck calls, johnboats, and bows and arrows for bow gigging, and probably many other things I don't know about!)

This brief description of Ozark river crafts and customs brings up the two interrelated issues of sustainable resources and access. Gigging as currently practiced — that is, relegated to rough fish and off season time slot — is a good example of “sustainable resources.” It provides protein for the local population, it thins out a fish population that needs thinning out, it can only be done from the bank or slow-moving boats and so does not harm or disrupt wildlife. On a sociological level it celebrates family life and validates community. It is an enlightened, intelligent interaction between human beings and nature. It is a type of fishing that has remained accessible to Ozark natives, and access to traditional hunting and fishing rights in this region can be a sensitive topic. There is a common perception that the “best” — best fish, best locations, best times, etc. — are being saved for tourists and other (often wealthier) outsiders.

Cecil Murray's concerns about the health of the river indicate, as well, that the Ozarks native's interest in hunting and fishing rights is not purely self-serving or ecologically naive. Many people who share Cecil's love of fishing realize, as he says, “If we don't take care of the river, we ain't gonna have no river.” His interest in building wooden johnboats, in teaching others how to build them, stems not only from a natural pride in his own craftsmanship, but a broader vision of how the wooden

boat can help protect the river he loves. Cecil states diplomatically that, in spite of the fact that “It's come on down that metal boats took over,” he's not opposed to them entirely:

They got those metal boats and, you know, they're good! But I think they ought to be used where they ought to be used. And where they don't need to be, they oughtn't be there.

Cecil Murray made the statement at one time that “There will always be wooden johnboats on the Current River as long as there is someone to build them.” The same can be said of hand-forged gigs. As long as gigging remains popular, and there are craftsmen like Paul Martin and now Ray Joe Hastings who know how to make them, there will be hand-forged gigs. Hopefully in years to come, as Ozark natives continue to practice their traditional customs and skills relating to the river, their commitment to maintaining these crafts and practices will deepen. The wooden johnboat, the hand forged gig, and the practice of gigging itself constitute a cultural heritage of riverlore unique to this particular area of the world. As such they symbolize Ozark cultural identity and regional pride. These skills deserve to be passed on to future generations.

#### End Notes

1 For more information on master johnboat builder Don Foerster of Van Buren, and a brief background on this type of boat, see Dana Everts-Boehm, *The Ozark Johnson: Its History, Form, and Functions*, in *The Masters and Their Traditional Arts* series (Columbia, Missouri, the University of Missouri Cultural Heritage Center, 1991).

2 James E. Price, “Bowin' and Spikin' in the Jillikins,” in *Ozarks Watch*, Vol. IV, No. 3, Winter 1990 (Springfield, Missouri, Southwest Missouri State University): 12-15.

3 For descriptions of other boats related to the Ozark johnboat, see: Malcolm L. Comeaux, “Folk Boats of Louisiana” in *Louisiana Folklore: A Guide to the State*

(Baton Rouge, Louisiana Folklife Program, Office of Cultural Development, 1985) and Harry Gammerdinger, “The Reelfoot Stumpjumper: Traditional Boat Building in Tennessee,” in Robert E. Walls and George H. Schoemaker, eds., *The Old Traditional Way of Life: Essays in Honor of Warren E. Roberts* (Bloomington, Indiana, Trickster Press, 1989), 78-95.

4 Taped interview with Cecil Murray, May 4, 1996, in his home in Doniphan, Missouri. All further quotes from Mr. Murray are from this interview.

5 Taped interview with Paul Martin and Ray Joe Hastings, February 18, 1996 at Mr. Martin's blacksmith shop in Bunker, Missouri. All further quotes from Mr. Martin and Mr. Hastings (with the exception of quotes from Mr. Hastings' article on bow gigging) are from this interview.

6 Robert B. Flanders and Robert K. Gilmore, “Fox Hunting and Fish Gigging: Conversations with Seaman and Swiney Rayfield, Shannon County, Missouri,” in *Ozarks Watch* Vol. IV, No. 3, Winter 1990 (Springfield, Missouri: Southwest Missouri State University), 35.

7 Jim McCarty, “A Night on the River,” in *Rural Missouri*, January, 1992 (Jefferson City, Association of Missouri Electric Cooperatives), 12-13.

8 Phone conversation with folklorist Brent Cantrell of the Tennessee Overhill Heritage Association, 3/4/96

9 Phone conversation with Roby Cogswell, folklorist with the Tennessee Arts Commission, 3/7/96

10 Price, op. cit., 12, 13.

11 Ray Joe Hastings, “Dad Called It Bow Giggin': An Early Ripley County Sport,” in *The Prospect News* Volume 109, No. 35, Wednesday, July 12, 1995, Doniphan, Missouri, p. 8

12 Price, op. cit., 12

13 Hastings, op. cit., 8

14 Price, op. cit., 13

15 Hastings, op. cit., 8

16 Flanders and Gilmore, op. cit., p. 34

17 Ibid, p. 34

18 Ibid, p. 33

19 Ibid, p. 34

20 Ibid, p. 35

21 McCarty, op. cit., p. 13

22 Flanders and Gilmore, op. cit, p. 22  
Note: All photographs, unless otherwise noted, are by Dana Everts-Boehm.

Quote used in title, “Buildin' Boats, Giggin' and Foolin' Around Is All Fun,” came from Cecil Murray in the May 4, 1996 interview at his home in Doniphan, Missouri.

M I S S O U R I  
**MASTERS**  
AND  
THEIR TRADITIONAL ARTS

*"The Masters and Their Traditional Arts" is an essay series written for Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. This essay was written by Dana Everts-Boehm, the Director of the Missouri Folk Arts Program.*

## The Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program

Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program was initiated in 1984 by the Missouri Arts Council and the Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Missouri-Columbia, with funding from the state and the National Endowment for the Arts. After the Cultural Heritage Center closed in 1993, the Apprenticeship Program found a new home with the Missouri Folk Arts Program, a program of the Missouri Arts Council that is administered by the Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

The object of the Apprenticeship Program is to document the state's most active, talented tradition bearers and encourage them to pass their artistic skills down to aspiring apprentices. To date the program has funded a total of one hundred and sixteen master artists to teach two hundred and forty-eight apprentices. The cultural and regional heritage of the state is thus recognized, honored, and conserved for future generations.

Master folk artists generally learn their skills informally, through observation or imitation, rather than from books or institutions. Their apprentices are most often members of the same ethnic, regional, occupational or religious community as the master. The art that they learn — whether it be Ozark gigmaking, African American blues, cowboy poetry, or Hawaiian hula — is deeply embedded in its community's history and daily life.

Program staff conduct fieldwork to find folk artists throughout the state, document their work with camera and tape recorder, and encourage them to apply to the program once they have found an apprentice. When the year's batch of applications come in, a panel of experts reviews them to select the most promising. Once selected, teams of master and apprentice work closely together for a period of nine to ten months. The masters and apprentices work together to conserve the state's cultural heritage for future generations.

The Missouri Arts Council's Missouri Folk Arts Program is provided with financial assistance from the state, the University of Missouri, and the National Endowment for the Arts.



MISSOURI FOLK ARTS PROGRAM



Folk Arts Program  
National Endowment for the Arts

