

# The Ozark Johnboat: Its History, Form, and Functions

by Dana Everts-Boehm  
Program Coordinator  
Spring, 1991



Gene Price steers johnboat on the Current River. Photo by Jim Joiner, Rural Missouri.

Missouri

THE **MASTERS**  
& their traditional arts

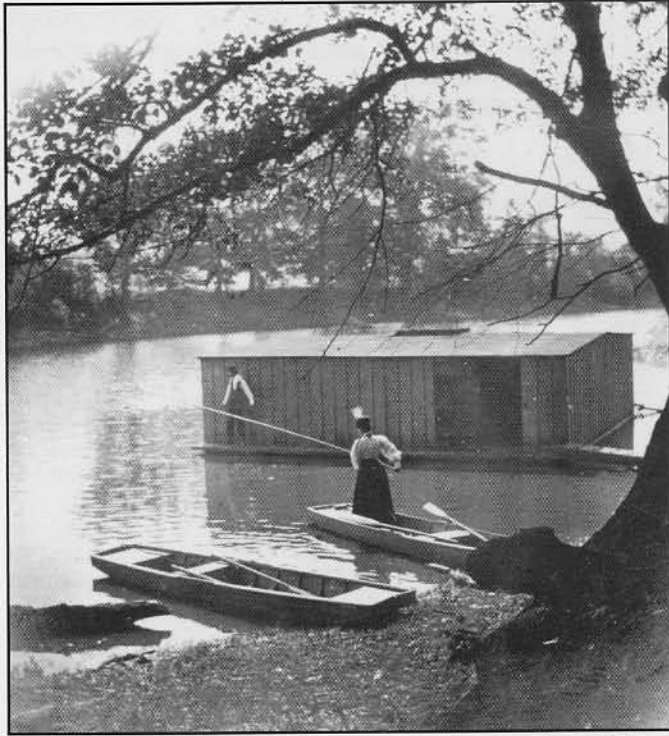
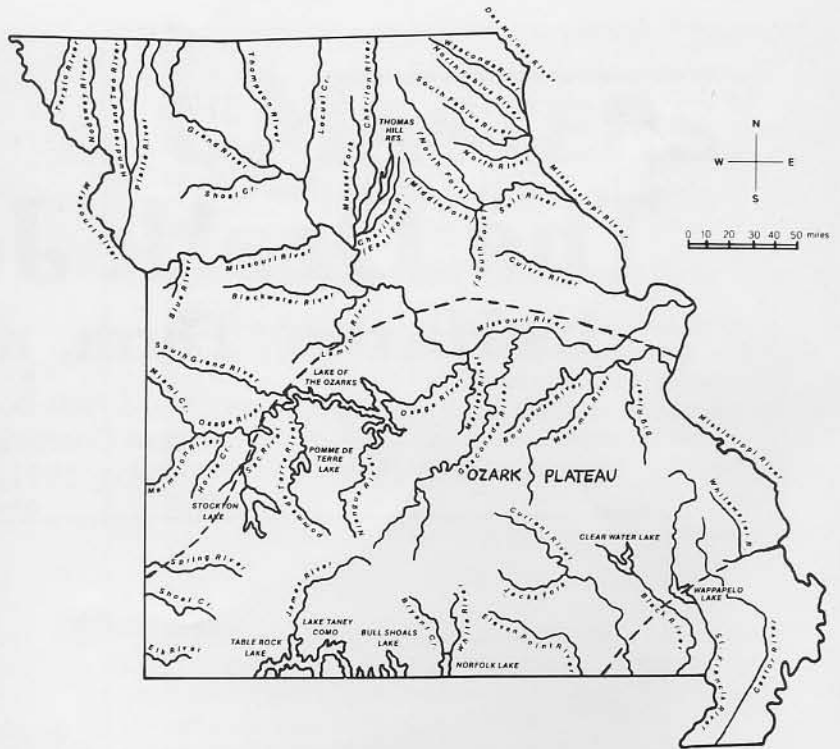


Photo courtesy of State Historical Society of Missouri

Prototype of the basic Mississippi drainage johnboat, here shown in a fishing scene from Lewis County, Missouri, May 9, 1896



From State Maps on File - Midwest

Major rivers and waterways of Missouri

## Introduction

This essay is based on research and interviews with Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program master johnboat builder Don Foerster and his apprentice, David Russell, both of Van Buren. Don Foerster grew up in the Current River region and learned to build johnboats from an older regional master, Bob Shockley, who has since passed on. I interviewed Mr. Foerster and Mr. Russell in late November, 1990. I would like to thank them for sharing their knowledge and insights with me, and for allowing the Cultural Heritage Center to quote them extensively in this publication.

## Part I: History

Although the invention of the Ozark johnboat has been attributed by some writers to twentieth-century White River guide and boat builder Charlie Barnes, its true origin is far older. A likely antecedent of today's Ozark johnboat was a flat boat that was introduced to the Mississippi drainage region by the earliest French colonists. Called a *chaland* or a *bateau plat* in Louisiana, this early flat boat was characterized by a flat, planked bottom, long, slender form, and blunt ends each with considerable rake (that is, the ends lift up high out of the water) (Brassieur:41). This pattern was undoubtedly derived from earlier European designs, as boats with flat bottoms and blunt bows and sterns were common throughout Europe before the settling of America. In the British Isles, these boats are called punts or scows. The Louisiana *chaland* or *bateau plat* evolved into numerous regional versions designed for specific functions that became known in different parts of Louisiana by a plethora

of terms including "bateau, launch, flat, joe-boat or john-boat" (Knipmeyer:142.)

Averaging between twelve to eighteen feet in length, two to three feet in width, the Louisiana flat boat was ideally suited for small rivers and bayous, and was used for transportation, commercial or subsistence trapping and fishing, and small scale logging. By the late nineteenth century, variants of this boat type could be found in Tennessee, Illinois, Missouri, and probably throughout the Mississippi drainage (Gammerdinger:83, 90). The johnboat has been identified as the most common workboat being used on the Illinois River by commercial fishermen in the early 1900s. The Illinois johnboat averaged eighteen to twenty feet in length, and was efficiently adapted for use with inboard motors in the 1920s by fisherman (Colten:1). Louisiana flat boats have also been adapted for use with motors, initially with small inboards affectionately called "putt putts." More recently, Louisiana flat boats have been shortened and widened to accommodate large outboard motors (Brassieur:41).

While it is uncertain when flat boats first appeared in the Ozarks, it is clear that they were in common usage by the late nineteenth century. Don Foerster, a johnboat builder from Van Buren, postulates that johnboats were introduced in great numbers to the Current River in southeastern Missouri by the logging industry in the 1880s (an opinion shared by Alex Outlaw of the National Park Service; see Joiner:4). River boats were needed to transport loggers in and out of the area, as there were at that time virtually no usable roads. The logging industry initiated a huge wave of settlement, as it opened up new farmlands and offered employment. Johnboats quickly became a necessity in the region.



*"Gigging on The Current River" by Howard Baer 1947 (University of Missouri-Columbia Scruggs-Vandevoot-Barney Collection)*

The new settlers found johnboats useful for a number of purposes. Foerster explains:

In the beginning, fishing was more a secondary thing. The boats were used for transportation. Everybody along the Current river had at least one or two boats, one on one side of the river and one on the other. The roads in the Ozarks were terrible until the days of Roosevelt, so you could travel by river faster than a person could walk the trails. Bob Shockley [the man who taught Foerster how to build johnboats] talks about using the boat to go to Doniphan once every two months. The family'd get into the boat and they'd float down river to Doniphan. And maybe they'd take some corn, apples, turnips, some good moonshine. They'd sell it, buy their supplies, and come back up the river. The boat was used as the "cadillac" of the Ozarks. Some people even made their living by taking people back and forth across the river. It was just the easiest form of transportation.

Current River residents also used johnboats in the local industry of railroad tie production, which flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The "tie hackers" would cut down huge oaks, prepare railroad ties, and chain or peg them together in the form of rafts to float downstream to sell in Doniphan. Following the sale, they would pole back upstream on johnboats. During this time, johnboats were also

employed on the Current River by fishermen, trappers, and hunters, for commercial, subsistence, and recreational purposes.

One of the favorite uses of the johnboat continues to be spear fishing, or "gigging." Gigging is done in the fall and early winter, at night. In the old days, a wire cage with a clay bottom, commonly called a "fire basket," was attached to the outside of the boat. A pine fire was then built in the basket to provide light so the fishermen could spot the fish, mostly bottom-feeders such as hog suckers, yellow suckers, redhorse suckers, drum carp, buffalo fish, and catfish. Once a fish was spotted, the standing fisherman would thrust his gig or spear in the water to impale it. Today, giggers rely on electric generators rather than fire baskets to illuminate the watery depths.

Foerster describes gigging as it was practiced around the turn of the century:

In the early days, they would start out about noon and pole upriver until dark, then float back with this fire basket, gigging all night. They talked about it not being very hard to kill a mess of fish, because there were a lot more fish in the river, a lot bigger fish.

According to Charlie Barnes, the well-known guide and boat builder from the White River, there was a particular variant of the johnboat built around the turn of the century specifically for gigging. Over thirty feet in length and only two feet wide, it was nicknamed the "redhorse runner" after redhorse suckers — one of the preferred fishes of giggers.

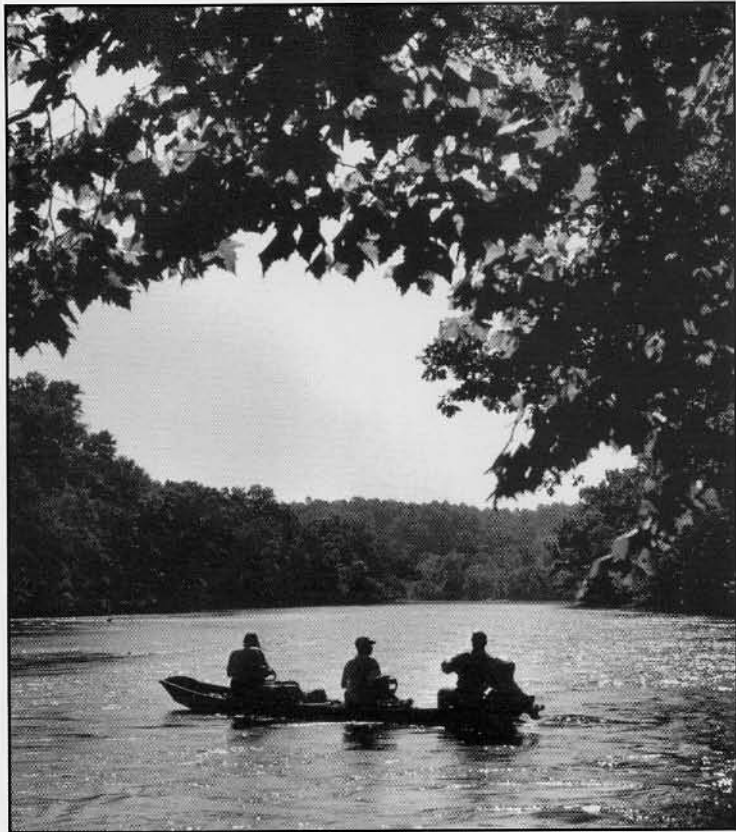


Photo by Massie

*Float fishing on the Current River, 1980*

According to Larry Dablemont, a third-generation river guide and boat builder, the johnboat was in evidence on the Big Piney River in south-central Missouri at least by the early 1900s. His chief source of information on this subject was his grandfather, Fred Dablemont. Fred's parents, of French and Cree Indian heritage, came to the Ozarks in the late nineteenth century. While still a boy, Fred acquired an old johnboat from a trapper. He soon became an expert fisherman, trapper and hunter, and his skills were sought after by sportsmen visiting the area looking for guides. After returning from military service in World War I, Dablemont developed a successful float fishing business for tourists and sports fishermen on the Big Piney. All five of Fred's children became float fishing guides, as did many of his grandchildren. His grandson writes that "the johnboat contributed to raising many a family in which trapping, fishing and guiding were the major sources of income. Some rivermen earned income from johnboats by building and selling them" (Dablemont 1978:8). Indeed, Fred Dablemont had built and sold over 1,600 wooden johnboats and more than 3,000 sassafras boat paddles before his death at age 73 (Dablemont 1978:6).

The float fishing industry flourished in the Ozarks between the 1920s up to the mid-1950s and offered rivermen an important source of employment after increasingly restrictive fish and game laws made commercial fishing and hunting no longer a tenable livelihood. Most of the float fishing businesses were small enterprises like Fred Dablemont's. Dablemont built his own boats, hired them out for one to two day "floats" with



Photo by Jeff Joiner, Rural Missouri

*Gene Price and his cypress johnboat on the Current River*

one guide, but didn't outfit the trips with provisions. By 1927, he was building johnboats and paddles for other commercial recreational outfitters. His grandson writes, "My grandfather's operation was as large as he wanted it to be. He never let his work interfere with his enjoyment of the Big Piney. That's the way most of the float fishing guides were. They kept largely to themselves" (Dablemont 1986:66).

In contrast, float fishing became big business in the hands of entrepreneur Jim Owen, an advertising manager for a Jefferson City newspaper who visited the Ozarks in 1933 and never left. Owen's business was located on the White River and lasted from the mid 1930s up through the fifties. He publicized his enterprise all over the nation and attracted wealthy and famous clientele. His float trips grew to eight day affairs, with native "colorful guides," expensive equipment and provisions, and a specially designed johnboat which allowed customers to sit in comfortable folding camp chairs rather than on hard wooden seats. Specialized johnboat chairs apparently became a popular item, and were made by Ozark woodworkers like Alva Bunch in Shannon County. By the mid fifties, however, Owen's business and many others floundered due to a number of factors, chief among them the damming of the White River.

Not many wooden johnboats remain in use in the Ozarks today. They have been almost completely replaced by canoes and aluminum johnboats, which have been shortened and widened for use with outboard motors. The lightweight aluminum models quickly became the preferred craft of tourists and sports fishermen, who increasingly bought and carried their own boats with them rather than renting local boats and guides. Because of their portability and low maintenance, aluminum johnboats quickly eclipsed the wooden variety not only in Missouri but throughout the Mississippi drainage (see, for example, Gammerdinger:91 on aluminum boats in Tennessee). Though modified, aluminum johnboats are based on the designs and measurements of their wooden predecessors. Fred Dablemont, for example, sold his johnboat designs to the Richland Company (which later became the Lowe-Line



Photo by Dana Everts-Boehm

*Don Foerster (on right) and apprentice David Russell fitting the side boards to the end piece*

Company, now centered in Lebanon, Missouri).

There are probably only a handful of wooden johnboat builders left — Foerster believes there are perhaps four along the Current River. “The wooden johnboat is like a lot of other good crafts,” he says. “It’s almost obsolete.” Yet Foerster likes to remember a story his teacher, Bob Shockley, used to tell, about a time when nobody believed that a motor boat could ever supplant a johnboat on the Current River. Foerster relates:

Originally these boats were designed to be poled up river, and they would use large push-paddles, which is nothing more than a long pole with a blade on the end of it. These poles might be sixteen feet in length. Well, outboard motors came out, and everybody felt how silly that was, to have a motor on the back of the boat. And this guy bought a new motor, and he began to brag about how fast it was. And this old gentleman who had push-paddled up the river for years began to laugh at him. The upshot of this was there was a wager laid down, and they were going to have a race. People gathered on the Doniphan bridge to watch the outboard motor versus the push paddle. Starting there at the bridge there was a pool of eddy water, and then there was a long, swift shoal. So they started on the eddy water, and the outboard motor just ran off and left this guy behind. The old boy was poling along. But when the outboard motor hit the current, it couldn’t hardly push the boat up the real swift shoal. Here’s this guy who’s methodically push-poling, bypasses him, beats him by almost a quarter of a mile. And everybody just laughed and carried on, said, “Those motors will never make it. They’ll never be worth anything. They’ll be all right for lakes and slow-moving

ivers, but they’ll never survive on the Current River.”

Boy, wouldn’t they get a shock today.

Larry Dablemont concurs with Foerster’s account as to the skill of the early boaters in push-poling upstream. He writes, “Those early guides, trappers and commercial fishermen could run a johnboat upstream over a shoal so strong you couldn’t stand up in it” (Dablemont 1978:56).

## **Part II: Form and Construction**

The Ozark johnboat is a distinctive regional type of johnboat. While it shares the common features of johnboats everywhere — a flat bottom, slightly flaring or curved sides, a squared bow and stern, and a rake at both ends — it is distinguished by its exceptional length and narrow width. Even among Ozark johnboats, however, there are numerous variations due to availability of lumber, intended function, and regional preferences.

The traditional Ozark johnboat was generally longer and thinner than johnboats anywhere else in the Mississippi drainage. Numerous sources state that in the days when the largest pine trees had not yet been cut, Ozark johnboats averaged 26 to 30 feet in length, and often surpassed 30 feet. Today, the wooden boat tends to be shorter for two reasons. First, there are very few pine trees left that are tall enough to make 26 to 30 feet side planks. And secondly, most modern wooden johnboats are adapted for use with a motor. The traditionally long, thin boat must be shortened and widened to allow it to plane on the water. White River guide Charlie Barnes built johnboats in the 1930s and forties for gigging that were only 20 feet in length and three feet wide. The boats he built for Jim Owens’s float fishing business were even shorter, for greater stability. Larry Dablemont describes a johnboat built for ponds that is only 12 feet in length.

Other local variations in Missouri involve the amount of rake at the ends. Wood joiner Jim Price of Naylor, whose father made wooden johnboats, recalls that the traditional Doniphan boat bent up after the seventh rib, while the Van Buren boat bent up after the sixth rib. The discerning riverman could thus identify the place of origin of any johnboat by its length, width, amount of rake, and other regional traits (Price: personal communication, 1991).

Johnboats are generally constructed upside down. The sides are made of pine planks that run the total length of the boat. Bent around a forming brace or temporary thwart, the planks are bound and drawn together at both ends with rope, using the Spanish windlass technique. Originally the bottoms were made of 4-8” wide pine boards nailed on crossways with a 1/8” to 1/4” crack between each board (Dablemont 1978: 7). Once the finished boat was placed in the water, the boards swelled up and sealed shut. Today, however, most wooden johnboat bottoms are made with a single sheet of marine plywood rather than pine planks. There are two reasons for this change. In the old days, boats were left in the water chained to a tree, so there was no danger of the bottom planks shrinking when they dried. Now that access to the waterfront is restricted, boats must be transported to and from the waterways. As planked bottoms must be kept wet at all times to prevent shrinkage and



Photo by Dana Everts-Boehm

*Russell and Foerster plane the tops of the sides before glueing on the rims*

separation, they increase maintenance problems for boats that must be stored out of the water. The second reason for abandoning planked bottoms is their greater weight. Boats with plywood bottoms are far lighter, an important consideration now that boats must be portable.

Today's johnboats generally employ four kinds of wood: plywood for the bottoms, pine for the side planks, white oak for the bow and stern and red oak for the ribs and gunwhale caps. Some boat builders, such as Cecil Murray of Doniphan, now make johnboats entirely out of plywood. Traditionally, johnboats were made out of whatever wood happened to be available and cheap. In the 1930s it cost about \$6 in materials to make a johnboat out of scrap boards from the local lumber yard. According to Gene Price, a johnboat owner from Ripley County, "a couple of locals would come to your place and make a boat for you in a day. You provided the lumber" (Joiner:4). In earlier days, when lumber was more readily available, some Current river johnboats were made of cypress.

Traditional johnboat builders do not use a blueprint or drawn pattern. They work from "memory," as Larry Dablemont puts it, or they do what "feels right," as Don Foerster was taught. In other words, the pattern is entirely mental, and each boat is an approximation of that mental concept. Speaking of his partnership with senior boat builder Bob Shockley, Foerster says:

We built boats, and I bet you there weren't any of them that were exactly alike. Today we lose a lot of the real enjoyment of the doing of things because it's patterned. There are x number of steps to accomplish something. The old timers, they didn't have that.

While he still builds in this traditional way, Foerster has changed the boat design in several ways from Shockley's

design. Because most johnboats are now used with small motors, he makes the boat shorter and wider, with less of a rake on the back end to accommodate the motor. The johnboat Foerster and apprentice David Russell made for the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program was 18' long, while the boats Shockley made were generally 24' - 26' long. Foerster uses plywood bottoms and screws instead of nails, because he feels that the vibrations of the motor cause nails to loosen and fall out. Although Shockley taught him how to build a boat entirely with hand tools, Foerster now generally uses power tools, unless he is giving a demonstration for National Park Service events or folklife festivals. Foerster maintains that he derives greater personal satisfaction from creating a boat completely by hand. Yet practical considerations such as time constraints prevent him from relying entirely on hand tools when he is building boats at home. Even Bob Shockley used power tools at home when he wasn't demonstrating for the Park Service.

### **Part III: The Future of the Ozark Johnboat**

There is still a handful of Ozarkians who prefer the long, slender wooden johnboat over any other craft for running the wild rivers. In spite of disadvantages such as weight, maintenance, and a shorter life span, the wooden johnboat has a number of advantages. Because of its greater weight, it is sturdier than an aluminum johnboat or a canoe, and safer for such sports as gigging, which requires fishermen to stand in the boat. In addition, its weight makes it less likely to capsize in a strong wind and easier to paddle. "You can't hardly paddle an aluminum johnboat," observes David Russell. Another plus is that the wooden johnboat is much quieter than an aluminum boat, which is a considerable advantage for hunters, trappers,



Photo by Dana Everts-Boehm

*David Russell, assisted by Don Foerster's father, flips the johnboat-in-progress over (note finished johnboat on the ground)*

fishermen and photographers. Modern Ozark wooden johnboats have rarely been fitted with outboard motors — they are still generally push-paddled, poled, or equipped with small inboards. Yet this is not perceived as a problem by rivermen such as Larry Dablemont, who feels that “A wild stream isn’t a place for man’s machinery” (Dablemont 1978:53).

Mr. Foerster notes that because of the relatively high cumulative cost of maintenance, there is little demand for wooden johnboats from the average river person. Very few of the thirty or so boats he has made and sold are in use on the Current River. He characterizes his customers as “some of the old fishermen or someone who’s into back to nature.” He believes the future of the wooden johnboat lies in the hands of craftspeople and rivermen who, like himself, derive personal satisfaction from carrying on a tradition. Its future also depends on the continued interest and support from organizations interested in cultural conservation.

On the other hand, David Russell believes that there may come a time when the remaining wild waterways are protected from “man’s machinery,” due to the growth of ecological concerns. At such a time, the wooden johnboat may make a comeback. Until then, Russell thinks that the johnboat must adapt to modern contexts and usages if it is to survive. He says:

One of the things Don and I have talked about is how we can adapt boats for our needs, as in building one for gigging, one for floating. Donny’s been trying to develop — and I’ve been trying to help him — a wooden johnboat that would take an outboard jet motor and plane real nice. If you look back to the traditions, those people adapted for their times. I think it’s important we adapt for our times now.

Whatever the future has in store for it, the Ozark johnboat

has made its indelible mark on the social and economic history of the Ozarks. Whether it continues to survive as a cultural symbol for older rivermen and traditionalists, or whether it once again achieves widespread use due to structural or contextual changes, we cannot know. We do know that the technique of building the traditional wooden johnboat is being passed on to at least one determined apprentice in the heart of the Ozark river country. And, as Cecil Murray of Doniphan observes, “There will always be wooden johnboats on the Current River as long as there is someone to build them.”



Photo by Dane Everts

*Don Foerster and David Russell*

## Glossary of Terms

- bateau plat* - Generic French term for a flat boat with a blunt bow and stern  
*chaland* - French term for a flat boat with blunt bow and stern  
*eddy* - A current of water running contrary to the mainstream, thus causing a whirlpool  
*forming brace* - A temporary thwart clamped to the sides of a boat to hold them in place during construction  
*gigging* - Spearing fish with a long pole fitted with a single or multi-pronged tip  
*gunwhale caps* - Protective wooden rails that run along the top of the gunwhales or side planking of a boat  
*inboard motor* - The first gasoline engines placed in small boats were placed inboard  
*marine plywood* - A specially treated plywood that is resistant to water rot. It is available in long sheets.  
*outboard motor* - A gasoline motor clamped to the transom or rear end of a boat  
*putt putt* - Name given to the inboard motor in the lower Mississippi drainage  
*Spanish windlass* - A rolling hitch turned by a stick placed between two strands of rope. When the rope is twisted it applies pulling force to that to which the rope is tied.  
*thwart* - Any transverse structural feature of a boat. The seats of canoes are thwarts; the bulkheads of larger work boats are also thwarts.  
*transom* - Aft-most structural feature in the stern of a boat. Outboard motors are clamped to the transom.

## For Further Reading

- Brassieur, C. Ray. "The Origin and Evolution of Mississippi River Fishing Craft." *Louisiana Folklife Festival* (Eunice, Louisiana, the Eunice News, 1989), pp. 39-41.
- Comeaux, Malcolm L. "The Origin and Evolution of Mississippi River Fishing Craft." *Pioneer America: the Journal of Historic American Material Culture* 1:1 (1978), pp. 73-97.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Folk Boats of Louisiana." *Louisiana Folklore: A Guide to the State* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana Folklife Program, Office of Cultural Development, 1985), pp.
- Colten, Craig E. "Tools of the River Trade." Informational flier, Springfield, Illinois, Illinois State Museum, n.d.
- Cox, Jim. "North Fork Tapestry: the River and its People Tell Their Story." *West Plains Gazette* 12 (May-June 1981), 37-50.
- Dablemont, Larry. *The Authentic American Johnboat: How To Build It, How to Use It*. New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The History of Float Fishing." *Fishing and Hunting Journal: The Magazine of the Ozark Region* 1:2 (May, 1986), pp. 62-67.
- Gammerdinger, Harry. "The Reelfoot Stumpjumper: Traditional Boat Building in Tennessee." 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), pp. 78-95.
- Godsey, Townsend. "The King of the Floaters." *Missouri Life* 5:1 (March-June, 1977), 67-74.
- Gray, Tania. *Reflections at Alley Spring*. Eminence, Missouri: Tania Gray, 1980.
- Hough, Stephen. "The Ozark Johnboat." *Bittersweet* 1:2 (Winter 1972), pp. 4-11.
- Joiner, Jeff. "Still Afloat." *Rural Missouri* 42:10 (Jefferson City, Missouri, Association of Missouri Electric Cooperatives, October, 1989), pp. 4-5.
- Knipmeyer, William B. "Folk Boats of Eastern French Louisiana." Don Yoder, ed., *American Folklife* (Austin & London: University of Texas Press, 1976 & 1977), pp. 105-150.
- Lincoln, Robert Page. "Float Trip in the Ozarks." *Arkansas Gazette Sunday Magazine* (June 15, 1941), pp. 3, 10.
- Massey, Ellen Gray. "Constructing an Ozark Johnboat." *Bittersweet Country* (Garden City, New York, Anchor Press, 1978), pp. 286-298.
- Price, James A. "Woodworking: the Ozark Experience." *The Masters and their Traditional Arts Brochure Series* (Columbia, Missouri, University of Missouri Cultural Heritage Center, 1987).
- Roberson, Margot McMillen and Howard Wight Marshall. *The Masters*. Columbia: University of Missouri Cultural Heritage Center, 1986.
- Waterman, Todd. "Tie Rafting: Floating Railroad Ties on Ozark Rivers." *Bittersweet* 7:2 (Winter 1979), pp. 44-55.

# THE MASTERS & their traditional arts

## The Masters and Their Traditional Arts

"The Masters and Their Traditional Arts" is a series of brochures written by experts in Missouri traditional arts. This brochure was written by Dana Everts-Boehm, edited by C. Ray Brassieur and Howard Wight Marshall, and based on a design by Spencer Galloway for the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. Brassieur provided definitions for the glossary.

## The Project

In 1984, the National Endowment for the Arts offered funds to states that wished to honor traditional artists and encourage them to pass on their skills. These artists, who learned their skills in their communities through apprenticeship and imitation of respected models rather than through academic studies, have often been neglected. Many authentic traditional arts that once flourished in Missouri communities, such as Irish step-dancing and bootmaking, have begun to disappear and are worthy of recognition and conservation.

The Missouri Arts Council and the Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Missouri developed our state's program to honor traditional artists. We call this innovative program the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program.

To begin, we use research to learn what kinds of communities exist in the state. Who were Missouri's first settlers? What groups came later, and what groups are still coming? We try to find artists who still have the important skills and encourage them to work with a new generation.

A state-wide panel of experts in traditional music, art and cultural heritage select participants from the many applications. The experts ask such questions as: Is the artist part of a community where the art is an important part of life? Is the art in danger of dying out? Is the artist a true master in his or her field? Does the artist's work show excellence?

The Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program is now seven years old. A traveling exhibition, produced by the Missouri State Museum, Department of Natural Resources, features the work of the participating artists and suggests how their art fits into the community. The exhibition, "The Masters," is a landmark exhibition, the first to honor traditional artists from across Missouri who have been selected both for excellence and authenticity by a state-wide panel of experts. (by Margot Ford McMillen, program coordinator 1983-5).

Financial assistance for this project has been provided by the Missouri Arts Council, a state agency, by the University of Missouri Cultural Heritage Center, and by the National Endowment for the Arts (Folk Arts Program)  
©1991 Curators of the University of Missouri

