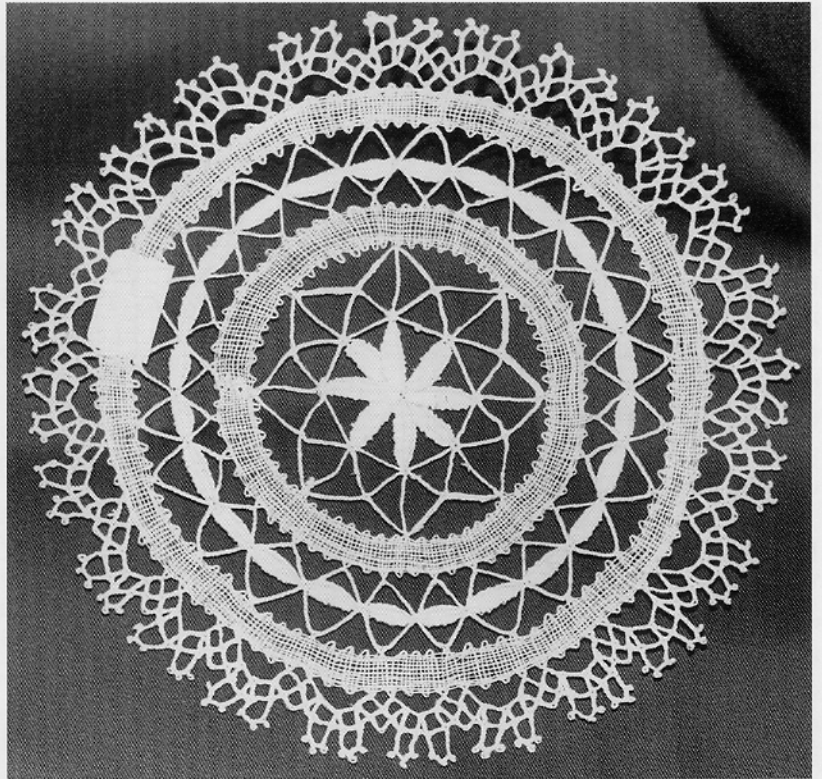


MISSOURI
MASTERS
AND
THEIR TRADITIONAL ARTS

Polkas, Fastnacht and Kloppelei:

Contemporary German Folk Arts in Missouri



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Introduction

Thirty-six percent of Missourians claim German ancestry, according to a recent survey.¹ This high percentage is the result of a massive German emigration to Missouri that took place between 1815–1860.² At that time Germany was not united, and it was really Bavarians, Westphalians, Waldensians and so forth, who emigrated. German emigration continues to this day, though in decreasing numbers. Marked German cultural traits are still evident, particularly in St. Louis and a region bordering the Missouri River known as Missouri's Rhineland (see Fig 1).

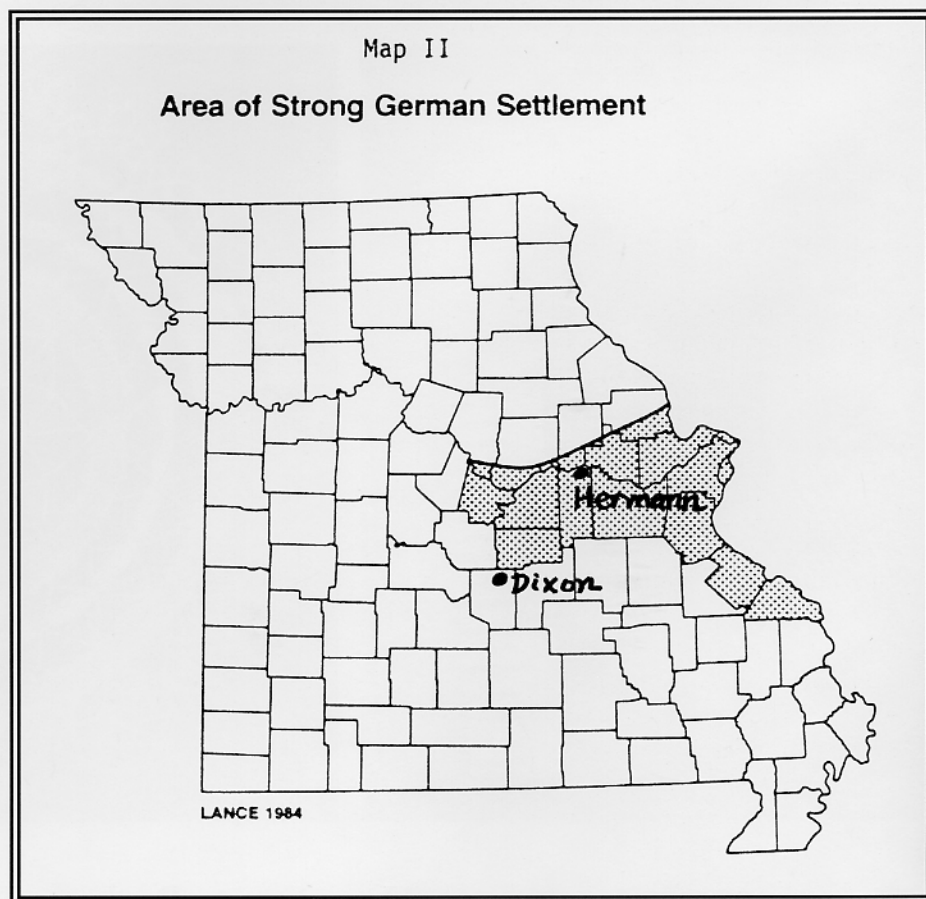
Separated from Germany for more than a hundred years, many Missouri Germans still maintain an avid interest in their European heritage. Recently introduced German immigrant art forms are welcomed and adopted. Such cultural cross-pollination suggests that ethnic enclaves like Missouri's Rhineland are in the process of redefining and expanding their ethnic identity beyond regional boundaries.

This essay tells the story of two master folk artists who were selected to participate in Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program in 1996–7: Marilyn Loehning, an accordionist from Hermann, and Christa Robbins, a bobbin lacemaker from Dixon. Their stories highlight the artistic heritage of Missouri Germans and that of recent German immigrants to the state.

Missouri's Rhineland: A Brief History

German immigrants first arrived in the United States in 1683 with the founding of Germantown, Pennsylvania. Missouri was not a popular destination until 1829, when Gottfried Duden's *Report on a Journey to the Western States of North America* was published.³ This glowing but misleading report galvanized thousands of Germans suffering from social, political and economic hardships to abandon their native lands and plunge into the Missouri wilderness. By 1860 more than half of Missouri's foreign-born population was German.⁴

They settled primarily in St. Louis and in the Missouri River Valley along the Osage and Gasconade Rivers. They chose the latter area because it reminded them of home, and because the Germans had a notoriously good eye for superior farmland.⁵ Settlement patterns varied. Many towns were founded by a distinct regional group. Westphalia, Missouri was



Area of Strong German Settlement. Map by Donald Lance, from *The German-American Experience in Missouri*, ed. Howard W. Marshall and James W. Goodrich, pg. 117.

COVER PHOTOS

(Foreground) Ehren Oncken on button box and Marilyn Loehning on piano accordion play for Fastnacht. February 11, 1997
Photo by John Carson

(Background) German bobbin lace or *kloppelei* by Christa Robbins of Dixon.
December 7, 1996

Note: All photographs by Dana Everts-Boehm unless otherwise noted.

primarily settled by Westphalians, while Loose Creek was the destination for natives of the Lower Rhine Valley.⁶

The town of Hermann was an exception on both counts. It did *not* have good farming soil, and it was settled by people from many differ-

ent regions of the Old Country. Yet today Hermann is regarded as Missouri's most quintessentially German town—which is no accident. Hermann is the result of an ideological blueprint for cultural retention. In 1836 the German Settlement Society of Pennsylvania



Example of German architectural design, Vienna, Missouri.

was founded with the purpose of creating a colony “where German language, values and traditions could be maintained.”⁷ A site on the Gasconade River was chosen and the first settlers arrived in 1837. Although the site proved to be ill-suited for farming, the settlers soon discovered that the hilly land surrounding Hermann was excellent for growing grapes. Hermann developed a booming wine-making industry which, along with beer and whiskey production, shoemaking, and shipping, granted its near 100% German populace economic independence and stability throughout the nineteenth century. As a result of this autonomous economic base, Hermann became exactly what its founders had envisioned—a place where German language, values and traditions flourished.

The residents of Hermann quickly founded a diverse array of cultural institutions. In 1838 settlers inaugurated their first brass band, a “Musik Chor mit Blech Instrumenten” (musical choir with brass instruments). A German school, the only one of its kind in the state, opened in 1839. In 1848 Hermann Germans lobbied the Missouri legislature to pass legislation promising that the school

would “forever remain a German school.”⁸ By the 1840s Hermann had a singing society. The two-story brick Musik Halle was built in 1852. In 1856 the Augusta Singing Society organized the town’s first Maifest (May Festival). German language newspapers proliferated in Hermann, including the state’s first abolitionist paper, “Licht Freund” (“Friend of Light”). German vernacular architecture flourished in the town, attracting German craftsmen, artists and laborers with the promise of a steady job and good pay.⁹ Churches were built as well as houses, and the services were in German. Wine fairs were popular in Hermann by 1869. A brass band with twelve members called, appropriately, The Apostle Band, “played at private and public functions and on almost every holiday” throughout the 1880s.¹⁰ Other popular musical groups of the era included the Harmonie Singing Society, “which gave concerts and serenaded local citizens on their birthdays and weddings” and the Hermann Brass and String Band.¹¹

Hermann’s spectacular flowering of German arts did not go unnoticed, and the town became one of the state’s first tourist attrac-

tions. The Gasconade County Agricultural Association Fair, held annually in Hermann, attracted visitors all the way from St. Louis.¹² Precursors of today’s Oktoberfest included “Erntefest,” a fall harvest festival and a “German Day” in October celebrating the first German immigration to America with parades, singing, and a ball.¹³

Such a daring and confident expression of ethnic identity in the American Midwest was not without its detractors. Various descriptions of “Old Stock Americans,” “Dominant White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Society,” “Native Missourians,” or “Anglo surnamed immigrants from the Upper South,” some members of Missouri’s Anglo majority were critical of their German neighbors. Anti-German sentiment was apparently exacerbated by a case of agricultural jealousy. Russell Gerlach writes:

The German farmer in the Ozarks came with the skills of agriculture fresh in his mind. By contrast, the Old Stock American in the Ozarks was (primarily) a pioneer who lived by hunting and fishing. In a comparative sense, this woodsman and hunter was up against some of the most skilled farmers Europe had to offer.¹⁴

DeBres concurs with this observation:

American animosity increased as they observed the frugal German farmers grow richer than they.¹⁵

The Germans differed from their Anglo neighbors politically as well as agriculturally. German newspapers spearheaded the abolitionist movement. Gasconade and St. Louis, the two counties in Missouri with majority German populations, were the only two counties in the state that elected Lincoln for president. Germans were largely responsible for keeping Missouri out of the Confederacy. Their support of the Union did not win them many friends among the “Anglo surnamed immigrants from the Upper South.”

Some members of the Anglo majority professed indignation at the comparatively tolerant German cultural attitude towards the consumption of alcoholic beverages. German beer gardens began to proliferate as popular venues for music, family gatherings and festive occasions, and were soon targeted by nativists. In 1855 a Know-Nothing (anti-immigrant) mayor of St. Louis adopted Sunday closing laws aimed at suppressing Irish pubs and German beer gardens. The growing temperance movement fanned the flames of anti-German prejudice with posters depicting negative stereotypic images of red faced "Dutchmen" (the popular term for Germans) hoisting gigantic tankards of beer.¹⁶

World War I provided the Anglo American majority with further ammunition to oppose their German neighbors. Teddy Roosevelt declared in 1916 that German Americans were "not Americans at all, but Germans in America."¹⁷ Overnight frankfurters became known as hot dogs and sauerkraut was renamed "liberty sausage." The German language was banned from all schools in 1919, and about that time the German language even disappears from the gravestones in Missouri's Rhineland, prompting this observation:

The decline of the German language, and with it the German American culture, is carved in stone.¹⁸

Following closely on the heels of World War I, Prohibition dealt an even heavier blow to German eth-

nic expression in Missouri. Prohibition destroyed the breweries of St. Louis and the wineries of Hermann, major industries of the Missouri German economy. Hermann was thrown into an early Depression.

In spite of such persistent efforts to repress German culture in Missouri, the grim pronouncements of its demise are premature. Even after World War II, German Americans in Missouri's Rhineland continue to display cultural resilience. The fact that some German folk arts are still thriving in the state is a tribute both to the vision of the original settlers, and to contemporary Missouri Germans who have created a niche for their traditional arts in late twentieth-century America.

Cultural Retention and Change: *Fastnacht and the Wurstjaeger Ball*

Just as they built farms and houses to last, Missouri Germans created enduring social institutions to support their language, music and crafts. DeBres notes:

In Hermann and Washington social organizations served...to preserve some of the traditions of the old country.¹⁹

Schroeder concurs that social institutions have played an essential role in cultural retention:

Clearly German customs, traditions and folklife in Missouri were strongly church, community and family-centered. It was because of the stable family life and the persistence of group activities that tradition has remained such a strong element in German-American communities.²⁰

One of the persistent customs Schroeder describes is Fastnacht, a pre-Lenten German version of Mardi Gras or Shrove Tuesday that is still celebrated today. Years ago, Fastnacht in Missouri's Rhineland was characterized by groups of roving beggars who went door-to-door asking for food. What they asked for varied from place to

place. In Hermann, for example, the *WPA Guide to 1950's Missouri* reports that:

On Fastnacht (the last night before Lent) the young people masquerade and go from house to house begging fastnacht cakes (doughnuts without holes) and other sweets.²¹

In the nearby town of Rhineland, the custom of begging for food was carried out by a group of adult dancers called Wurstjagers (sausage hunters):

Until recently the Wurstjager went from house to house and farm to farm in Rhineland, Missouri, on Fastnacht, serenading in the local dialect and collecting the farmer's best sausage for the traditional feast.²²

Schroeder traces the Wurstjagers to Germany's Rhineland, noting the similarity in texts between German Heischelieder (begging songs) from that region and those sung during Fastnacht in Rhineland, Missouri.²³

The traditional feast following the ritual begging was known as The Sausage Ball. The Sausage Ball is still celebrated today, but the custom of fasching or begging has

disappeared. Jim Oncken of the Loehning German band describes the custom as he remembers it:

At that time all the people did their own butchering and they would make a nice big sausage especially for the Wurstjaegers. So the men would collect the sausages. They would meet at the community hall. The women would cook the sausages and all their German dishes—potato salad and sauerkraut—and then they would dance.

Over the years Fastnacht has been celebrated in diverse venues: on rural backroads and town streets, in townhalls, bars, dance halls and, currently, in a church hall. The Hermann Advertiser-Courier, February 26, 1997, reports, for example, that:

Denis Hagedorn, who grew up in Rhineland, said that the Wurstjaegers "brought the sausage back to Gosen's Corner (a local bar) before the Sausage Ball."²⁴

Rhineland oldtimer Fritz Theissen recalls when saloon-keeper Charles Rincheval celebrated the Sausage Ball in his family saloon to "keep people coming to Rhineland."²⁵ And Bob and Ann Owens,



Photo by John Carson

The Rhineland Wursthjaegers kick up their heels at the 1997 Fastnacht celebration in Columbia, MO.

owners of the Modock Tavern in Rhineland, hosted their own Sausage Ball until 1973. It is unclear why the ball ceased after that, but it didn't disappear forever. Ten years later the Sausage Ball resurfaced in, of all places, the United Church of Christ in Columbia, Missouri, an hour's drive west from Hermann. This dramatic shift in venue requires some explanation.

The United Church of Christ is, historically, a German denomination. German immigrants coming to Missouri generally professed one of three religions: Roman Catholic, German Lutheran, and German Reformed. German Reformed regrouped over time into the United Church of Christ.²⁶ The pastor of the United Church of Christ in Columbia, Pastor Brandenburg, is a Hermann native. When he moved to Columbia, he took Fastnacht with him. His congregation, including a high percentage of German Missourians, embraced the custom with open arms and has hosted the event now for fourteen years. Marilyn remarks:

Brandenburg is a German guy from here, from Hermann. And he just wants to carry it on. I guess he just kind of dropped the bomb on them (his congregation in Columbia). And said, this is what we're going to do!

Today musicians, dancers and Sausage Ball aficionados from Rhineland, Hermann and environs annually make the trek to Columbia every February to participate in this in-group affair. The Loehnig German Band and the Rhineland Wursthjaeger dance troupe haven't missed a single year performing for the United Church of Christ's Sausage Ball. The dance troupe performs the songs and dances once used by the sausage hunters.

The Rhineland Wursthjaegers were organized in 1948 by Fritz and Betts Theissen of Rhineland, in response to a request for Missouri German musicians and dancers at the National Folk Festival in St. Louis.²⁷ In addition to Fastnacht, the Rhineland Wursthjaegers perform each year at Hermann's Wursthfest, Maifest, and Oktoberfest, among other engagements. They are invariably accompanied

by the Loehnig German Band. The Junior Wursthjaegers, a children's troupe, performs at many of the same occasions.

Fastnacht is only one example of contemporary Missouri German folklife. Other examples abound: the town's vernacular architecture was saved by a fundraising effort which turned Maifest from a small-town children's festival into a massive tourist event in 1952. Maifest, Wursthfest, and Oktoberfest are modern incarnations of older seasonal festivals. Hermann's Deutschheim Museum features the work of local craftspeople. Homemade headcheese and blood sausage on display during Wursthfest, or fettkuchle (fastnacht donuts) sold seasonally in local bakeries, are examples of local foodways. Of particular interest here is the traditional German music of Missouri's Rhineland, a folk heritage master accordionist Marilyn Loehnig of Hermann is currently sharing with her talented young apprentice, Ehren Oncken.

Music Washes the Soul of Care:

The Hungry Five, The Loehnig German Band and Their Predecessors

As noted earlier, Hermann had only existed one year before it had its first brass band. A variety of German traditional music from “oom pah” brass bands to singing societies, from sausage hunter songs to family bands, continue to be an essential ingredient in Hermann’s social life. Today Hermann boasts two traditional German bands: The Hungry Five and the Loehnig German Band.

The Hungry Five, the popular brass band in Hermann, plays for local and regional events year round. Trombonist Jim Oncken of The Hungry Five traces the band’s origins to 1930, when it performed to commemorate the completion of the bridge across the Missouri River between McKittrick and Hermann. Now that the band includes seven to nine members, they introduce themselves as “The Hungry Five, and the rest of us are all thirsty.”

Jim Oncken describes the Hungry Five as a marching band as opposed to a dance band:

It’s brass band type music, oompah, marches. When the Maifest started they always did the Maifest parade. It’s a band for beer drinking and entertainment. We play for picnics at the park.

B.A. Wagner, the original leader of the band, also had a twelve piece big band called “B.A. Wagner and His Orchestra” that *did* play for dances, but it was popular, big band music as opposed to German music.

Hermann residents recall Sonny Bottermueller’s Peace Valley Orchestra and its predecessor, a rather informal ensemble remembered, simply, as The Andy Band. These two related groups originated some time in the 1920s.

Sonny Bottermueller’s Band was still going strong in 1958 when thirteen-year-old Marilyn Fuerman of nearby Marthasville joined the band and met her husband-to-be, guitarist Terry Loehnig. The two married shortly after graduating from high school. Today Marilyn Loehnig is a master accordionist in Missouri’s Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. She recalls:

I started learning the German songs when I got connected with Sonny Bottermueller’s Peace Valley Orchestra. They played for the Wurstjaeger Ball, which used to be in Rhineland. They played those German songs for all the dancers, things like “Du, du, liegst mir im Herzen,” “Zuv Lauterbach Hab Ich Mein Strumpf Verlor,” “Freut Euch Des Lebens.” I liked that kind of music.

One of the members of Sonny Bottermueller’s band was Andy Scheutz, former leader of The Andy Band. Marilyn comments:

Ehren’s (Marilyn’s apprentice) great-great uncle, Andy Scheutz, played in that band. And what did he play? Button box! So button box, push pull accordion, was played in the Peace Valley Orchestra when we were young kids.

Marilyn, a master of both the piano accordion and the button box, is currently teaching button box to thirteen-year-old Ehren Oncken. Ehren has progressed so quickly that he is now a regular member of the Loehnig German Band. At the recent Fastnacht in Columbia, Terry Loehnig tells the crowd about Ehren’s instrument:

Back to Ehren here, our



Marilyn Fuehrman and future husband Terry Loehnig (center) playing for passerbys in downtown Hermann, circa 1960. Photo compliments of the Loehnig family.



The Loehnig German Band plays a waltz for Fastnacht. Pictured are Jim Oncken on trombone and son Ehren on button box.



Terry Loehnig and Pastor Brandenburg lead the audience in a rendition of “Schnitzelban” at Fastnacht.

young star. He's got a special button box that he's playing here right now that was his great-great-uncle Andy Scheutz's button box. Andy used to play in Sonny Bottermueller's Peace Valley Orchestra. Andy played that accordion 'til he died and then it just sat around for many years. Ehren's great aunt bought it at a sale and had it for awhile, finally gave it to Marilyn when Marilyn started to play button box. Then, when Ehren started to play button box, we thought it was only right that it should go back to Ehren.

The tale of how this instrument passed hands among several families confirms Schroeder's observation concerning the role of family stability in maintaining traditions. Marilyn Loehnig has not only given the instrument back to the Onckens, she is teaching their son the same music his great-great-uncle once played on that very instrument. Not surprisingly, the Loehnigs and the Onckens, who comprise most of the personnel of the Loehnig German band, are related. Terry Loehnig playfully alludes to this while introducing the band members during Fastnacht:

Terry: That's Jim Oncken over there on trombone, he's my second cousin...once removed.

Jim: Don't want to get too close to you Loehnigs!

Terry: And Ehren, his son and my cousin, twice removed.

Ehren: Farther away and glad of it!

The Loehnig German Band, a natural progression of Marilyn and Terry's participation in the Peace Valley Orchestra, did not actually materialize until after the Loehnigs' first trip to Germany. When he joined the Army ROTC in 1968, Terry Loehnig was stationed in Germany for two years. Marilyn came with him and they both took to Germany like ducks to water. They avidly listened to bands, collected folk music albums and songbooks, bought drindls and lederhosen (traditional Bavarian clothing) and learned tunes and songs to add to their regional repertoire back

home. Their first daughter, Teri Lynn, was born in Germany.

Finally returning to Hermann in 1973, the Loehnigs began training their three children Teri, Angela and Erich, to play German music. In no time The Loehnig Family Band became known as Hermann's own Von Trapp Family. They were soon in demand at the Stone Hill Winery, Maifest, Oktoberfest and other local venues. Marilyn proudly recalls:

It was something we did as a family.

My daughter Angie sang her first solo at the Maifest beer garden when she was barely three.

While the Loehnig children, now grown, still join in when they can, over time the band has gained new personnel and changed its name to the Loehnig German Band. The group now features Terry on guitar, Marilyn on piano accordion and button box, daughter Angela on drums, Jim Oncken on trombone, Ehren on button box and Ken Vale on tuba. The Loehnig German Band plays all over the Missouri Rhineland region, for the Strassenfest in St. Louis, in the Missouri German towns of Concordia and Cole Camp and at ethnic festivals in Illinois and Nebraska. The Loehnigs have returned several times to Germany since their initial trip, accompanied by the Onckens. The two families continue to absorb musical influences from Europe, incorporating them into their hometown band's repertoire.

Marilyn and Ehren

The Hermann Area Visitor Edition, Fall 1996, writes:

How could a thirteen-year-old boy and a fifty-one year old woman be a perfect match? It sounds unlikely, but when Ehren Oncken and Marilyn Loehnig play the accordion, they seem as one. And wherever they play, they bring down the house.²⁸

That is no exaggeration. There is an unusually profound rapport

between this master and apprentice that is rare even in a traditional arts apprenticeship program. Marilyn and Ehren are well aware of it themselves. Marilyn comments:

I played by ear for four years before I ever took a lesson. So did Ehren.

That's why I think we click when we play together.

In answer to the question on the Apprenticeship application form, "Why do you wish to study with this master?" Ehren writes simply:

She is like my second mother.

Like Marilyn, Ehren was born into a musical environment. He laughingly remarks:

Even before I was born I've been hearing it! From *him!* (indicating his father) Playing his German music and trombone music all the time! And his tapes! And his records!

Marilyn has known Ehren Oncken since he was born. Ehren's father Jim has been taking Ehren to rehearsals and performances since he could crawl. One evening following a concert Ehren asked Marilyn if he could try her two-row button accordion. To Marilyn's amazement he began picking out the tune to "Horsch was Kommt vom drausen Rein," which he performed on stage soon after, at the age of eight-and-a-half. Marilyn has been teaching Ehren ever since, intensively for the last two years as participants in the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. She says of her protogé,

He shows a keen interest in German music and is exceptionally talented. He has a terrific ear and picks up melodies very quickly. This makes teaching less complicated because most songs I do not have written music for, but I can teach Ehren by showing him notes and fingering.

While emphasizing the regional repertoire, Marilyn also challenges Ehren's skill with more difficult pieces learned from outside the region, such as Czech polkas and Alpine yodeling. She is helping him learn German by teaching German song lyrics and pronunciation. She teaches by example, illustrating a

precise, clear style characteristic of German American musicians in general:²⁹

I think I'm a stickler for being a clean player. I want it distinct and clean and good.

Both Marilyn and Ehren envision a shared future. After their first year in the apprenticeship program officially ended, Marilyn told the local newspaper:

It's over, but we're not over.

And in his application Ehren writes:

I would like to keep playing with Marilyn and in the future maybe have a German band of my own.



Photo by John Carson

Marilyn and Ehren working on a song together during a lesson. February 26, 1997.

Creative Ethnicity

Contemporary Missouri German folk arts serve two primary functions: they are a celebration of in-group identity and values, and a tourist attraction. This shift from cultural events intended primarily for insiders (local German Americans) to events intended primarily for outsiders (tourists) is mirrored in regional and ethnic cultures all over the United States and the world. The onslaught of cultural tourism can prove harmful to local traditions, but it can also, under favorable circumstances, offer new opportunities to folk artists. Taking the former view, DeBres warns:

Hermann is in danger of smothering in its touristic associations and in its own success. Today's residents view their town's past through the filter of mainstream American culture, a past that is sanitized, selective and in all probability, non-existent. The town is becoming a museumized version of the past which is to be viewed only on special occasions—hence the festivals.³⁰

While there is undoubtedly some truth to that observation, it's only one side of the story. It's unrealistic to expect Hermann Germans to express their ethnic identity in precisely the same way their ancestors would have done so a hundred and

The Loehnig Family Band, including Teri Lynn, Angela and Erich. Photo courtesy of the Oncken family.



fifty years ago. The introduction of Bavarian costume and Slovenian polkas to the older regional repertoire suggests neither inauthenticity or a "past that is non-existent." Rather, such interesting innovations are examples of an authentic present. Combining musical ideas from a variety of sources including

Missouri German, Upper Midwest German, and European German is part of a process dubbed "creative ethnicity." Writing about culturally hybrid "Dutchman" bands in the Upper Midwest, March and Leary characterize creative ethnicity as "overlapping boundaries, emergent evolutions and combinations."³¹

The Loehnig German Band exemplifies creative ethnicity. The band combines a regionally-based repertoire with national and international influences. The fundamental repertoire consisting of local German American favorites carried on from the Peace Valley Orchestra days now includes Bavarian, Alpine, and other kinds of folk music currently played in Germany, as well as German American, Czech, and Slovenian tunes the Loehnigs and Onckens have picked up from polka fests throughout the Midwest. Terry Loehnig describes one such festival the band attended recently:

Jim and Bonnie Oncken and Ehren and Marilyn and I went up to a polka fest on the outskirts of Chicago. There were bands from Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri... They rent out a big hotel there with four hundred rooms to polka people. There were as many as thirty-one people playing out there for the dance group. And one of the bands invited Ehren to come up and join them for a few numbers, which I thought was quite an honor for him.

Many of the performers at these polka fests belong to the musical genre called "Dutchman bands" from the Upper Midwest, recently described by Leary and March. Their description is, in fact, reminiscent of the Loehnig band:

At the genre's center is a rhythm section anchored by an "oompahing" tuba and martial drums over which a concertina push-pulls dance melodies. Dutchman bands often build around this basic concertina-tuba sound...with combinations of harmonizing brass and reeds.³²

Replace the concertina with the button box, add a piano accordion, a guitar and a "harmonizing" trombone, and there you have the Loehnig German Band—very similar, structurally, to the Dutchman band of the Upper Midwest. Through exposure to polka fests such as the one described above, Missouri Germans have become familiar with Czech, Bohemian and

Slovenian American music, all of which have helped form the Dutchman genre. This familiarity accounts for the presence of such show-stopping button box duets as Marilyn and Ehren's "The Slovenian Home Polka" in the band's repertoire.

Clearly, the Loehnig German Band is no "museumized version of the past," nor does it intend to be. It is, rather, a regional band strongly rooted in its own ethnic heritage, yet creatively open to change from a variety of carefully selected sources.



Andy Schuetz (far left) and members of "The Andy Band." Photo courtesy of the Loehnig family.

The Loehnig German Band. Left to Right: Jim Oncken on trombone, Ken Vale, tuba, Ehren Oncken, button box, Marilyn Loehnig, piano accordion, Terry Loehnig, guitar, and Erich Loehnig, drums. Photo courtesy of the Loehnig family.



Kloppelei: German Bobbin Lacemaking is Reintroduced to Missouri

Missouri Germans are no longer an isolated regional culture. Their concept of German music and culture is informed by more than just what they inherited from their grandparents and great-grandparents. This expanded awareness of their roots and ethnic identity sets the stage for recent immigrants and the introduction of “new” Germanic folk arts—that is, arts that are new to Missouri. It is not surprising to find such recent introductions immediately embraced as examples of Missouri German ethnic identity.

One such recently introduced folk art is *kloppelei* or German bobbin lace. Bobbin lace was introduced to Germany in the sixteenth

century, when it was promoted as a cottage industry to augment the incomes of poor peasant women. A printed handout used by master lacemaker Christa Robbins of Dixon, Missouri, reads:

Barbara Uttman, born 1514, died 1571, founded a lace school at Annaberg with the hope of lessening the poverty of her countrywomen. With assistance from Flanders, she taught pillow lace-making to 30,000 persons.

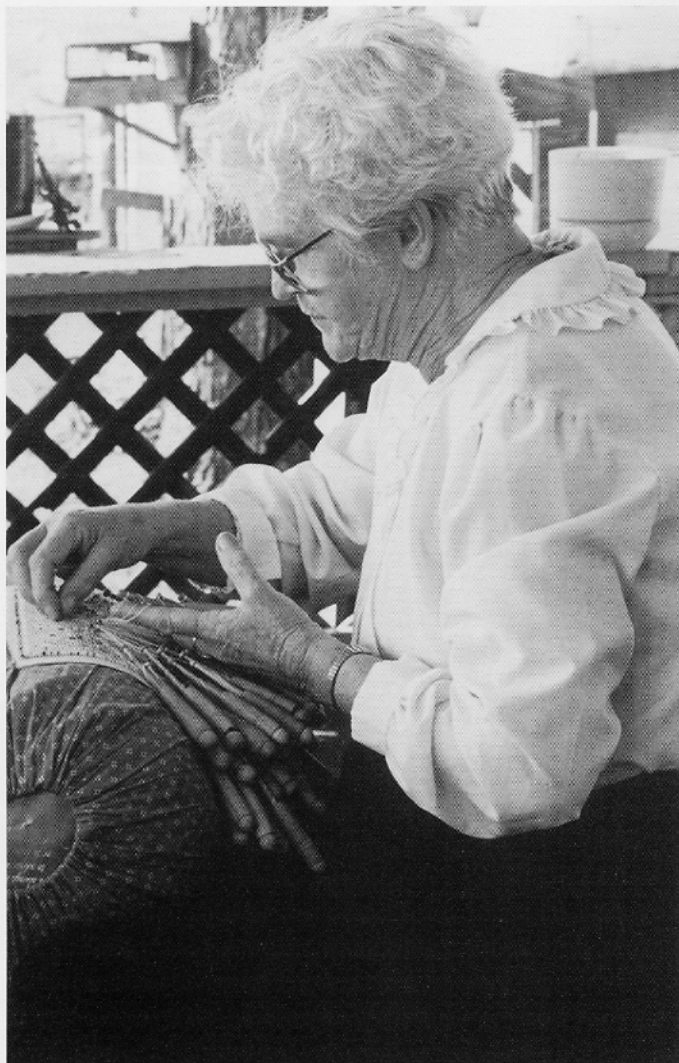
Today, *kloppelei* is still being made only in a few parts of Germany, most commonly in the province of Erzgebirge in former East Germany.

More than four hundred years after its introduction to Germany, *kloppelei* was still taught in *klop-*

pelschulen (lace schools), and it was still considered an excellent way for poor farm women to augment their incomes. Eight-year-old Christa Hecker of Bernbach in the province of Erzgebirge began to attend *kloppelschule* in 1936. She went to *kloppelschule* every afternoon after school, well aware that it was a sacrifice for her mother to pay for the lessons. She recalls:

The first two months I had to go every day, five days a week, one hour. The first lace I made for my grandma, I had two, three mistakes in it. And I didn't have the patience to open it up. So I got mad and took all them *kloppels* (bobbins) and just threw them together into a big pile. And then went home. It was just

Christa Robbins with *kloppel* stand, *kloppelsack* (pillow) *kloppels* (bobbins), on her porch in Dixon. March 8, 1997.



Apprentice Beverly Bartek works on a piece of bobbin lace.



about quitting time anyhow. And the next day I didn't go to *kloppelschule*. My mother said, "How come you don't go to *kloppelschule*?" So I told her I didn't feel good. (Laughs) I lied. And the next day I thought, I gotta go. Mum has to pay for every hour. So I stood in front of that door and it took me a while to get in there. I went to my place where my *kloppel-sack* was sitting. I opened it up and everything was perfect. My teacher, after everybody goes, she go through and check. And she fixed everything. And you know, I felt *that* big. And I promised myself, you *never, ever* do that again. And I never did.

As her skill increased, Christa began working on her lace at home. She was selling her lace-work by the time she was twelve:

We had a hard, rough time to grow up. Depression and everything. And then the war. I made a little bit of money and helped out with the household. When the war was on we had to work for farmers. After the Russians came in I quit and was home and I kloppeled for five, six months.

When the Russians took over East Germany, they closed Christa's beloved *kloppelschule*. Christa and her teacher barely managed to save a book of old lace patterns from the school before it was shut down. She made copies of many of the older patterns from the book and still uses them today.

At age nineteen Christa went to work for farmers in West Germany. Eventually she met and married Jimmy Robbins, an American serviceman from Arkansas who was stationed in Germany:

Then we got married, got kids, and



German bobbin lace school or *kloppelschule*. Image from a German postcard from the province of Erzgebirge, courtesy of Christa Robbins.

then I just could kloppel in the evening. I had some of my children in Germany, some in Fort Leonard Wood (Missouri), and then some back in Germany. Back and forth. But I still done lace in the evening.

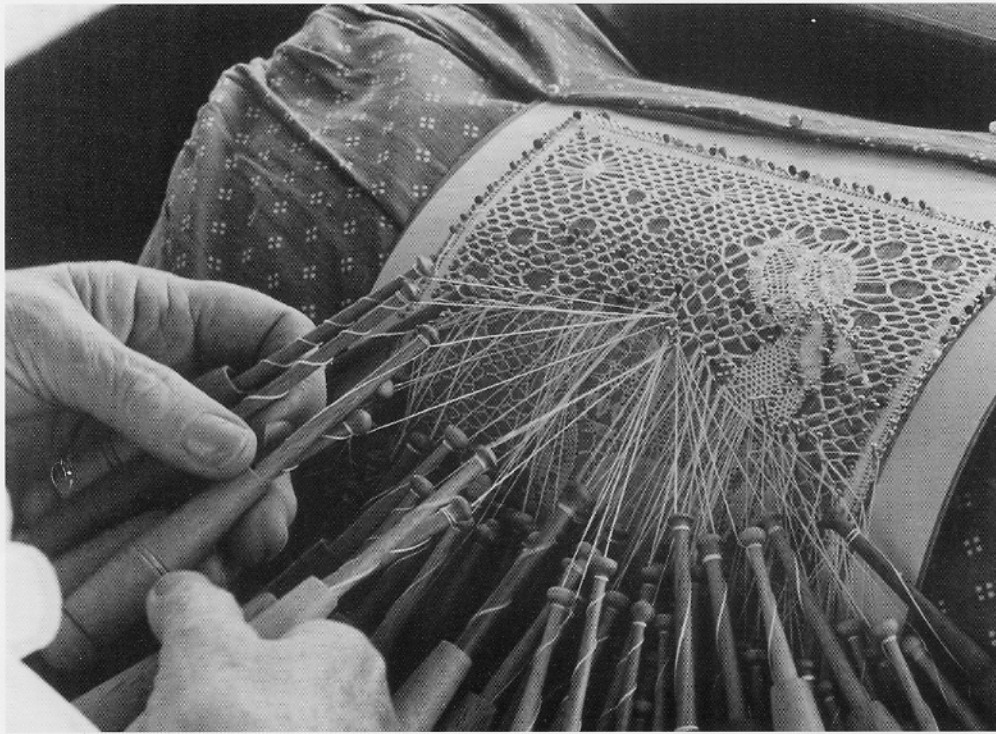
Seven children later, Christa Robbins decided that, as much as she loved her native land, it was

time to settle down. She and Jimmie bought a farm in Dixon, a quiet little town south of Vienna, Missouri (see Fig. 1) on the border of Missouri's Rhineland. Life wasn't easy in Dixon:

And I worked in the factory and made payments and kept the farm going. We milked the cows and each

The kloppelbreve (lace pattern) in black is easily seen beneath the linen thread covering part of it.





Christa works on one of her most difficult designs, the kloppel maiden.



Christa's daughter Merrie Pendleton shows a would-be apprentice the rudiments of the craft at demonstration in Jefferson City, April, 1997.

of the kids had chores to do. We all worked together. And on weekends I had to cook ahead for the week. When the kids come home from the school bus, they were *hungry!* And I baked *every* night a cake.

In the midst of keeping a farm, raising seven children, working at a factory, and baking cakes every night, Christa kept up her lace-work. Her daughter Merrie recalls:

My mother's done it all my life. I can remember her sitting and kloppeling, the sounds of the kloppels. It amazes me. She's so fast and you can see it develop in front of your eyes...the more she works on it, the more amazing it is.

For years, the only people who saw Christa's work were her immediate family and a handful of close friends and neighbors. Retired, her children grown, Christa had more time for *kloppeling*. About five years ago she was asked to demonstrate for a festival in nearby Iberia. During the festival she was approached by Jane Torres, the owner of a German craft shop in Hermann, who promptly invited Christa to display, sell and demonstrate *klopperei* in her shop. Christa responded warmly to the invitation and began to demonstrate once a month at Jane's shop, bringing new pieces to sell when she came.

One customer from Marthasville was particularly intrigued by Christa's bobbin lace as it reminded her of something she had found in her husband's grandmother's attic. Christa tells the story:

Jeanette came in Jane's store and says she thinks she got some of them bobbins. She had German kloppel in a bag, but so old you can't use it no more. It was in a box in her husband's grandma's attic up there in Marthasville. They cleaned the attic out and Jeanette said, I would like to have them. And they said, Go ahead, take it, I throw it away anyhow. See? People don't know what it is. Jeanette's husband's grandma was from Germany. Jeanette didn't know her, she died already. But she had the German bobbins.

This account is the only evidence I have found to date that *kloppelei* was made in Missouri prior to 1958, the year Christa and Jimmie Robbins came to Fort Leonard Wood. Ravenswaay's *The Arts and Architecture of German Settlements in Missouri* does not mention the presence of *kloppelei* or any kind of lacemaking. Even if there were bobbin lacemakers at one time in Missouri's Rhineland, it is not a craft that is practiced by Missouri Germans today, with the exception of the handful of women who have recently learned it from Christa. Ravenswaay offers an explanation of why lacemaking might not have survived long in nineteenth century Missouri:

Unlike Germany, where ornamental arts were always in demand, Americans were primarily concerned with essential crafts. The burgeoning towns in the new West had little or no need for goldsmiths, artists, engravers, and many other crafts that were commonly practiced in many of the smaller German cities. Furthermore, many luxury goods used in this country were imported from Europe.³³

With Christa's presence, German bobbin lacemaking has another chance to take root in Missouri. Its chances for survival may be better now than they were a hundred and fifty years ago. Convinced that *kloppelei* belongs here, Christa is determined to share her art with others:

There used to be bobbin lace here. They done it and then they got away from it. But I like to keep it on and teach as many as I can.

Christa's strong desire to teach is a response, in part, to a growing receptivity for Missouri German crafts. Since Christa has been marketing and demonstrating lacemaking for the public, she has been approached by numerous women and girls who ardently desire to apprentice themselves to her. Current apprentice Beverly Bartek describes a lifelong quest to become a lacemaker:

My grandmother on my mother's

side is German. My grandma did a lot of handicraft work and I always wanted to do the real intricate, delicate kinds of lace. The first year I went to Oktoberfest, I walked into Jane Torres' shop. She had this newly-made lace sitting there. I just looked at it and I was amazed because it was just what I wanted to learn how to do.

It took Beverly three years to persuade Jane Torres to give her Christa's phone number. By this time, Jane had been approached by a number of women interested in learning *kloppelei*. She invited Christa to her house to give lessons to a group of four women twice a month. Christa was more than willing to oblige, but Beverly felt uneasy about the arrangement:

We did pay Christa a fee, but I didn't feel it was enough money. She had to drive two hours to get to Hermann to give the lesson. I felt it didn't even cover her expenses, let alone her time to do this. I just felt there should be a better way. We should be going to her to get the lessons, not her coming to us.

Thanks to a niece of Jane's who was taking a folklore class at the University of Missouri, Beverly and Jane found out about the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program and promptly applied as

Christa's apprentices. Under the Apprenticeship Program, the master is paid a fair honorarium and the apprentices do go to the master's house to learn. Unfortunately, Jane Torres was not able to continue in the program. This left the door open for another to take her place: Christa's daughter Merrie. Merrie states:

I didn't think it would ever be possible for me to learn this. I didn't have the patience to sit still, and no desire when I was young.

In October 1996, Merrie accompanied her mother and Beverly to Deutsch Country Days, an annual festival celebrating Missouri German folk heritage that takes place in Marthasville. Merrie agreed to come along to help sell her mother's lace. This event proved to be a turning point for her. She was struck by the fervent message from the crowd:

They told me that I should learn. That I should not let it die. That I was her daughter and I should learn this.

Within a matter of weeks, Merrie signed up as her mother's second apprentice. Asked how often she works with her mother, Merrie, who lives just up the road, laughed:

Oh, three to five days a week. In October I was over here almost every night!

Christa Robbins and proud grandson at a demonstration in Jefferson City, April, 1997.



Clearly thrilled to have such avid apprentices, Christa is particularly proud of her daughter's enthusiasm:

Merrie told me the other day, she said, "Mom. It's one thing I have trouble mit." I said, "What?" She said, "I can't quit at night." When the kids is awake, she can't do much. And when they go to bed she says, "I can't quit. I'm there til ten o'clock, still sitting there working on it." And she gotta get up four-thirty!

Merrie plans to pass this art form on to *her* daughter who, at age six, has already begun to learn the stitches.

In addition to her two apprentices, Christa is teaching three women in Hermann and four new students from Jefferson City.

Christa is especially pleased that three of the Jefferson City students are young girls, aged 10 to 14:

It would be nice if younger people would be interested. What you learn as a child—that stays. You never forget it. And it's a lot better than T.V. or Nintendo!

The Art of Kloppelei

Before starting off her apprentices, Christa orders 100 wooden bobbins (*kloppel*) each and 1000 meters of linen thread each from Bernbach, Germany. She makes them each a bolster (*kloppelsack*), gives them a set of pins and teaches them how to make copies of her lace patterns (*kloppelbreve*). Most of Christa's patterns are copies from books that she and her teacher managed to save from the *kloppelschule* in Bernbach before the Russians shut it down. The lace patterns are xeroxed, glued onto cardboard, and holes are punched onto them where indicated. The patterns are then affixed to the bolsters with pins. Other equipment used for *kloppelei* include the *kloppelstander* or kloppel stand, a tall wooden table onto which the bolster is set; a hole puncher (*lochscacher*) to punch holes into the patterns, and a wooden winder (*windler*) to wind the linen thread. A modern element that Christa introduced to the inventory is hairspray.

She sprays the finished lace to stiffen it and protect it from bugs.

There are five basic stitches used in bobbin lace: whole, half, linen, new, braid and spider. The new stitch is so named because it was introduced in the eighteenth century. In addition to the stitches one has to master numerous kinds of joinings or connections.

Christa begins by teaching her students the three basic stitches: whole, half and linen. They make long strips of each stitch until it is perfected; then they are allowed to embark on a project. Next Christa shows the apprentice how to fix the pattern on the bolster with pins and, most importantly, how to *read* the pattern. Beverly explains:

(Points to the pattern) Like here you do braiding. And that's a linen stitch. That's what we say when we read the pattern. That's what she's teaching us to do, rather than a book saying "Cloth stitch so many things using these pairs, then whole stitch..." This way you read the pattern without written instructions.

The earliest projects are a simple bookmark or a border for a piece of cloth. As the apprentice progresses, she attempts a doily, eventually working up to complex designs, collars, tablecloths, and curtains. At the time of my visit, Beverly was working on a long, wide doily for her buffet table and Merrie was busy making angels, bells, snowflakes and candles for Christmas presents. Different projects require different numbers of bobbins. Beverly's buffet table doily, for example, employs sixty-four bobbins. One of Christa's favorite designs, the kloppel maiden, uses one-hundred-and-thirty-six bobbins.

Function and Niche

For years Christa Robbin's primary motivation for carrying on this skill was personal. She comments:

If I get upset I sit down and do it and I relax. And my kids is proud of me too and my husband is proud. I just feel I have to do it. Maybe I just want

to keep my German up. It's something that you keep all your life and can pass it on.

Until recently, Christa had only taught her daughter Edna Vicker-son of Frederickstown, and some beginning lessons with Merrie. But the moment she stepped outside of her family to sell and demonstrate *kloppelei* in public, she attracted new apprentices and buyers. The fact that she has demonstrated primarily in the Missouri German area at events such as Deutsch Country Days and in shops in Hermann contributes to the warm reception her lacework receives. There is an appetite for German American folk arts and heritage among tourists of all backgrounds. And there is a niche for such art forms in the growing numbers of festivals and craft fairs featuring German heritage. Christa recognizes the cultural ties between herself and the descendants of immigrants who came here several generations ago. She remarks:

When we was in Marthasville (Deutsch Country Days), there was quite a few older people with parents, grandparents who were German. They was really interested, too.

Historians might protest that dressing Christa in a nineteenth-century outfit and placing her and her lacework in a log cabin next to spinners, rope weavers and chair-makers gives the misleading impression that *kloppelei* was once a prominent German art form here in Missouri. The historical record suggests that *kloppelei* was never common here. The only evidence it was here at all lies in the contents of one box from one attic in Marthasville.

The real import of this situation—historical accuracy aside—is that Missouri Germans themselves and the public at large are so eager to adopt *kloppelei* as their own. This points to creative ethnicity, the idea that American ethnic groups are constantly in the act of reinventing themselves, redrawing boundaries in an inclusive rather than exclu-

sive way. Folklorists, cultural geographers and historians might balk at some of these inclusions; the people themselves do not.

Conclusion

The Loehrig German Band from Hermann, the Rhineland Wursthoppers and Christa Robbin's *kloppelei* are a few examples of contemporary Germanic folk arts in Missouri. Cultural tourism obviously contributes to the survival and flourishing of Missouri German folk music, craft, foodways and other traditions as it provides a niche for their public presentation and an economic incentive to new apprentices. The annual series of festivals in Hermann and environs provides Marilyn and Ehren and the Loehrig German Band ample opportunities for public performances. Their growing fame has catapulted them into out of state venues. Hermann shops and Deutsch Country Days welcome Christa Robbins with open arms and supply her with new apprentices and buyers for her *kloppelei*.

The question remains as to whether Hermann might, in fact, be in danger of "smothering in its own success" as DeBres fears. Studies in cultural tourism suggest that the larger the numbers of tourists coming in each year, the greater the impact on the local culture, and the harder it is for the local culture to control that impact.

In the meantime, however, it appears that Missouri Germans are using cultural tourism to their benefit much in the same way that they have used other forms of institutional support for their folk arts. They are extraordinarily resourceful in finding ways to make their artistic heritage both relevant and attractive in today's pluralistic society.

End Notes

- ¹Robyn Burnett and Ken Luebbering, *German Settlement in Missouri: New Land, Old Ways* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1996): 1
²Ibid: 1
³Ibid: 3
⁴Ibid: 3
⁵Russel L. Gerlach, *Immigrants in the Ozarks: A Study in Ethnographic* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1976): 106
⁶Burnett and Luebbering, op cit: 10
⁷Ibid: 27
⁸Ibid: 30
⁹Anna Hesse, *Centenarians of Brick, Wood, and Stone* (Hermann, Missouri, 1969): 1
¹⁰Karen Jean De Bres, *From Germans to Americans: The Creation and Destruction of Three Ethnic Communities* (Columbia University doctoral thesis, 1986): 163
¹¹Ibid: 163
¹²Ibid: 180
¹³Charles van Ravenswaay, *The Arts and Architecture of German Settlements in Missouri: A Survey of A Vanishing Culture* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1977):52, and DeBres, op cit: 181
¹⁴Gerlach, op cit: 106
¹⁵DeBres, op cit: 114
¹⁶Burnett and Luebbering, op cit: 108-11, and DeBres, op cit: 183, 196

- ¹⁷DeBres, op cit: 195
¹⁸Ibid: 218
¹⁹Ibid: 105
²⁰Adolf Schroeder, "The Contexts of Continuity: Germanic Folklore in Missouri," in *Kansas Quarterly* Vol. 13, N. 2, Spring 1981: 100
²¹Charles van Ravenswaay, *The WPA Guide to 1950's Missouri* (Missouri State Highway Department, 1941, reprinted by University of Kansas Press, 1986): 393
²²Schroeder, op cit: 97
²³Ibid: 97
²⁴Hermann Advertiser Courier, February 26, 1997: 7
²⁵Donna Holman, *Rhineland: Winter in a Missouri Rivertown* (Columbia: Curators of the University of Missouri School of Journalism, 1979): 189
²⁶Russel, op cit: 113
²⁷"Wursthoppers Keep Traditions Alive at Hermann Festivals," in Hermann Area Visitor, Spring Edition 1997: 12
²⁸Hermann Area Visitor, Fall Edition, 1996: 4
²⁹James P. Leary and Richard March, "Dutchman Bands: Genre, Ethnicity and Pluralism in the Upper Midwest," in *Creative Ethnicity: Symbols and Strategies of Contemporary Ethnic Life*. Edited by Stephen Stern and John Allan Cicala (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1991): 25
³⁰DeBres, op cit: 41
³¹Leary and March, op cit: 40
³²Ibid: 24
³³van Ravenswaay, 1977, op cit: 304-5

Ehren on the dance floor with his mother, Bonny, and another partner at Fastnacht.



Photo by John Carson

MISSOURI
MASTERS
AND
THEIR TRADITIONAL ARTS

Missouri Masters and Their Traditional Arts

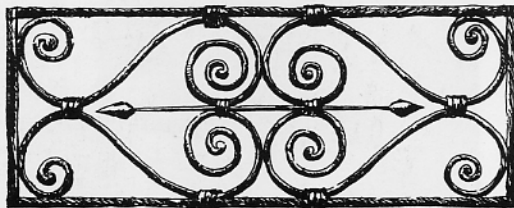
"The Masters and Their Traditional Arts" is an essay series associated with Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program.

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. The Apprenticeship Program is now part of 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 master traditional artists and encourage them to pass their skills on to aspiring apprentices, thus conserving the state's cultural heritage for future generations.

Master folk artists learn informally through observation or imitation. Their apprentices are most often members of the same folk group as the master. The art form, whether it be German accordion music, bobbin lacemaking, African American blues or Mexican folk dance, is deeply embedded in its community's history and daily life.

The Missouri Folk Arts Program is funded by the Missouri Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the University of Missouri.



MISSOURI FOLK ARTS PROGRAM



Folk Arts Program
National Endowment for the Arts



MUSEUM OF ART AND ARCHEOLOGY

