

Cherishing Missouri's Heritage

Mizzou's Cultural Heritage Center strives "to document, conserve, interpret, and celebrate the heritage of the state and region."

Story by Jim Kelty
Photos by Barry Bergey



Old-time fiddling scholar Charlie Walden, right, learned to play from Taylor McBaine, left, a lifelong resident of Boone County. McBaine's father would often step outside to play on clear summer evenings and would be answered by fiddlers from neighboring households more than two miles away.



Left: Up on "Sorehead Hill," backyard artist Jesse Howard of Fulton put his thoughts and feelings on display. Numerous American and European art collectors have purchased Howard's works in recent years. **Right:** Alfred Pelster stands in front of the structure that once housed crops, cattle, sheep, swine, horses and the Pelster family.



IN HIS YOUNGER DAYS, Kansas City jazz master Claude Williams hopped and bopped around the country with legends such as Count Basie and Mary Lou Williams. Today, Williams is handing down his musical legacy to future generations, thanks to UMC's Missouri Cultural Heritage Center.

Williams is one of several master performers participating in the center's Missouri Traditional Music Apprenticeship Program. Through a 14-session course, the dazzling violinist teaches his Kansas City brand of fiddling to three promising young players.

"The sessions are very informal," says apprentice Michael Henderson, AB '76. "We're having fun but we're all working hard to learn. It's the neatest class I've ever taken."

The idea behind the program is to encourage master/apprentice relationships, thus helping perpetuate the indigenous musical traditions of Missouri, says the center's special projects coordinator, Barry Bergey, AB '66.

"Claude is probably too modest to admit it, but when he tours in Europe, it's not unusual for him to draw 15,000 people to one of his performances," says Bergey. Most listeners would agree that Williams' style is a tradition worth preserving.

Between 1920 and 1940, Williams was part of a swing jazz movement that emerged from the cabarets, lounges, bars and jitney dance halls of Kansas City and spread throughout the land.

HIS ARTFUL FIDDLING technique has become an endangered species in recent years with the decline of traditional jazz in American popular culture. But as a product of the Kansas City sound, Williams is the type of master

performer the center had in mind when it devised the apprenticeship program in 1984.

"I would like my style to continue, and all three of these apprentices are good," says Williams, a 77-year-old who looks much younger. "Every time we meet, I put at least a couple of tunes on

tape so they can play and try to get 'em down between sessions."

"We want the apprentices to have a chance to learn the unique technique and repertoire of a particular master, and become part of the musical tradition of a community or region," says Bergey. Proliferating Missouri's "tradition bearers" heightens the awareness of Missouri's heritage, and that, says Bergey, "is what the cultural heritage center is all about."

THE CENTER, established in the Graduate School in 1982, is an information

clearinghouse and an interdisciplinary research center that explores the wide-ranging themes and topics of the state's heritage. Through lectures, concerts, town meetings, traveling exhibits, special courses and other projects, the center turns the fruits of its research back to the citizens and taxpayers.

Forklift operator Howard Marshall, AB '70, the center's director, says that understanding Missouri's heritage is often a matter of focusing on the history that's left out of the history books. "I like the idea of examining things that other people consider incidental or

Ham curing and cooking experts Bud and Phala Gardner of Rocheport, Mo., demonstrated their skills at the Louisiana World Exposition in 1984. The center coordinated Missouri Folklife Week at the exposition.



unimportant," says Marshall, "things you can find by looking at the everyday landscape of Missouri."

One of the center's proudest research projects led to an exhibit that celebrates the Pelster housebarn of Franklin County, an area where German immigrants settled in large numbers during the 19th century. Built in the 1860s, the housebarn accommodated the Pelster family, farm animals and agricultural products under one roof. The multilevel structure, now on the National Register of Historic Places, combines Old World tradition, such as



Larry Boehm photo

The center's director, Howard Marshall, holds a pair of mule shoes. Hundreds of thousands of Missouri mules were shipped overseas to assist the Allied forces during World War I, Marshall says.

mortise-and-tenon construction, with American innovations such as galvanized metal roofing and a front porch.

In 1983 and 1984 the exhibit traveled as far as Washington, D.C., as part of the tricentennial anniversary of German immigration to America. "We haven't paid enough attention to the German heritage in Missouri," says Marshall, a native of Randolph County and a former staff member at the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution. "Missouri's written history is a slanted story, slanted by the people who write it, and the gaps in that story are legion."

Aptly symbolic of the state's people and past is the Missouri mule, a complex and thoroughly misunderstood creature.

"Mules are more intelligent than horses and have characteristics that make them superior to horses, but most people don't know that," says Marshall. A mule, for example, doesn't panic under stress and never overeats. When its back is overloaded, a mule will refuse to walk.

According to Marshall, such behavior indicates wisdom, not stubbornness.

DESPITE A BAD REPUTATION, mules farmed land, hauled lumber and minerals, and moved generations of settlers westward. Mule breeding centered in Missouri, which bordered the mule-power-hungry Cotton Belt and where Kansas City and St. Louis were jumping-off points for the frontier. (See "Missouri Mules: No Harness Strong Enough," *Missouri Alumnus*, September-October 1984.)

A traveling exhibit on Missouri mules is being assembled by the center, the University extension program and UMC professors Duane Dailey and Marvin Bradley. The exhibit will make its debut this summer at the Missouri State Fair in Sedalia. "Exhibits are symbolic of our versatility," says Marshall.

In 1983 the center teamed up with the art department on a display honoring Jesse Howard of Fulton, a retired itinerant farmhand with a sixth-grade education. Howard, who died shortly thereafter at 98, spent the last 30 years of his life filling his yard with hand-painted and opinionated signs, homemade windmills, small wooden airplanes and other makeshift constructions, which gained him a reputation as the local "crackpot" and "cantankerous old fool."

"Some of these Fultonites had better take a course in civility [sic]," says one of Howard's messages.

In recent years his idiosyncrasies have been written about in books, newspapers and magazines. His environmental artwork has been displayed in numerous galleries around the country, including the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Gaspery Folk Art Gallery in New Orleans.

"It just goes to show that sometimes you have to be English to appreciate the Eiffel Tower," says Marshall. He cites the Jesse Howard story as a perfect illustration of the need to re-examine Missouri's back yard and take nothing for granted.

Recently the center began a public lecture series, Missouri Colloquium, a forum for University faculty members and others doing research on Missouri. The series gives citizens a chance to learn about topics such as the state's Amish and Mennonite communities, the state's wine industry and former Secre-

tary of State James Kirkpatrick's view of Missouri politics.

The center's information specialist, Michael Everman, is helping the Missouri Department of Natural Resources develop a state plan for historic preservation. With the Missouri Arts Council, the center is organizing a folk arts touring program.

Bergey is currently surveying the cultural landscape in hopes of developing a directory of people who are practicing old-time skills and musical forms. Charlie Walden, M Ed '84, a former research associate with the center, helped get the project off the ground in 1983 when he spent a year touring the state recording and photographing old-time fiddlers.

"I thought someone should make note of the tradition while there are still people you can talk to about it," Walden says. Walden interviewed approximately 50 fiddlers, most of whom don't read music. One of his interviewees, Cyril Stinnett of Andrew County, can play more than 300 tunes from memory.

Walden, himself a seasoned and award-winning old-time fiddler, experienced his greatest thrill when he interviewed 70-year-old Nile Wilson of Bucklin, Mo., who "just sat down and started playing tunes I'd never heard of before—as many as 20 different pieces." Walden is grateful for the opportunity to do the project. "The center is a good vehicle for breaking down the isolation between different fields of thought."

Funding for the center's various projects comes from a number of sources, including the Graduate School, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Missouri Arts Council and the University's Weldon Spring Fund.

The center, says Marshall, is "a stove with a lot of pots."

"NO OTHER UNIVERSITY in the nation has a research center just like this one, but I'd say this kind of work is a coming thing. It's long overdue."

Though research is meant for the "increase and diffusion of knowledge," too often academics stop when the job is only half-done, Marshall adds. "We try to mold our work into something Uncle Bill and Aunt Molly can relate to and benefit from. We're a state university, after all."