

Fifteen Years of the Missouri Folk Arts Graduate Internships

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In addition to a strong network of professional folklorists in the academy and public sector, Missouri is fortunate to have a strong academic program of Folklore, Oral Tradition and Culture Studies Program in MU's Department of English. The study of folklore at MU offers a truly interdisciplinary experience, including the opportunity to intern with the Missouri Folk Arts Program (MFAP). Ms. Schmidt completed her MA in May, 2008, and is now a doctoral candidate.

The Missouri Folk Arts Program is known nationally for its Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program, which pairs master folk artists with apprentices to pass traditional art forms on to the next generation. Like those master artists, MFAP staff members also pass on a set of skills, values and inspiration to future generations of folklorists through an internship program. MU alumna and Snow College Professor of English David Allred interned at MFAP in 2001. He notes that "The experience was such that I'd suggest every folklore grad student take the opportunity to intern at MFAP. Given the academic folklore job market, such an internship can be valuable."



David Allred interviews German bobbin lace apprentice (now master artist) Linda Hickman in Dixon, Mo., in 2001. Photo by Deborah Bailey.



Lisa Rathje observes gig-maker Ray Joe Hastings at his forge in Doniphan, Mo., in 2002. Photo by Deborah Bailey.

I myself am just a few months into my internship. Since September, however, I have learned that a staggeringly diverse range of traditional arts thrive in Missouri, from Irish uilleann piping to hand-crafted mandolins. My internship experience is changing the way I see the world. Therefore, I was eager to research the history of the internship program on the occasion of its fifteenth anniversary.

In 1993, the MFAP began to host graduate student interns from the Folklore, Oral Tradition and Culture Studies program. Interns work in the MFAP offices with the program director and in the field with the folk arts specialist for two consecutive semesters and earn course credit. Interns log roughly 175–200 hours in the office, during site visits with apprenticeship teams and at public events around the state, gaining hands-on experience side-by-side with professional folklorists. Interns assist in all stages of the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program: processing applications; filming and photographing

apprenticeship teams at work; and educating state legislators about the talented traditional artists who reside in their districts.

Interns also work on public festivals, like the Big Muddy Festival in Boonville, Mo., and on public arts education programs, like the Folk Arts in the Schools Residency program, which brings traditional Missouri artists into schools. Interns get first-hand insight into grant writing and administration through their work on the Missouri Arts Council's Folk Arts grant process. In addition, students read scholarly articles by leaders in the field of public sector folklore, draft reports and write an exit essay that ties together their readings and work. Each of these tasks is essential preparation for a folklore career in the public sector.

Since the creation of the internship program, thirteen graduate students have participated—ten since 2000. They have gone on to jobs as folklore professors and folk arts administrators in the public sector, as well as careers in law and government. In 1992, MU folklore professor Elaine Lawless introduced two of her doctoral students to Dana Everts-Boehm and Julie Youmans, then the director and folk arts specialist of the Missouri Folk Arts Program. The students were so excited to learn about real life

applications of folklore theories and practices that they convinced Dr. Lawless to work with MFAP and the Department of English to create an internship. By 1994, both of the students had completed their internships.

The first intern was Virginia Muller, now an Assistant Teaching Professor in English at MU, and the second was Lisa Higgins, MFAP's director since 1999. She recalls, "Before I even began my internship, I had an inkling that my career path would change. During the internship, I made the decision to pursue a career in the public sector. Three years later, I landed a position with a regional arts organization in Atlanta, Ga., working with Peggy Bulger, one of the leaders in our field. It's no surprise that the MFAP internship has been a priority for me since I returned to direct MFAP in 1999. The internship not only benefits the students, our program and the state, but we also contribute to the future of the field of folklore."

Like Dr. Higgins, as interns leave the program, they are able to connect their academic studies with their new public sector experiences. According to former intern Lisa Rathje, "Being able to observe the artists at work, hear or read what they had to say about their art forms, and see the close ties that formed between master and apprentice through the art they both practiced provided a look at folklore in action that is not often encountered in academic life." Since the completion of her internship in 2002, Rathje has become the Arts and Heritage Specialist at the Institute for Cultural Partnerships in Harrisburg, Pa., where she uses skills she first practiced at the Missouri Folk Arts Program. Similarly, Columbia, Mo., attorney Anthony Phillips, who interned in 2000, recalls "Working with [Higgins] showed me how a well thought out public sector program can have a tremendous impact on local space and people—which of course should be the focus of any folklorist." Former interns also credit the Missouri Folk Arts Program internship with changing the course of their lives. Scott Mitchell, who interned from Fall 2005 to Spring 2006, notes, "Before this internship I thought of myself as primarily an academic folklorist. This internship made me realize that the divide between public and academic folklore is not and should not be as wide as it is often perceived to be."

If my own experience can be taken as an example, I can safely say that the internship has profound and lasting impact on the intern. I have discovered that folklorists themselves are advocates, activists and apprentices who have an intensely positive impact on the communities they serve. In September, I watched applications for the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program come in, and really understood for the first time that folklore and traditional arts go beyond quilts and banjos. Missouri culture manifests also in foodways, such as home hog butchering; immigrant material culture, like Laotian embroidery; and newer traditions like Mexican low-rider car conversions. Then, in October, I witnessed first-hand the emergence of a rural tradition when I travelled with Dr. Higgins to meet with the tri-county Boonslick Tourism Council, an organization that sponsors the newfound Missouri barn quilt project.* In November, I discovered the Western Historical Manuscript Collection at Ellis Library, where the first twenty years of MFAP files, photographs, video tapes, audio interviews and materials are stored. As I sift through these boxes, I realize the far-reaching benefits of this public arts program. By December, I feel my mental scales tipping the balance between becoming an academic folklorist and a public folklorist. When January rolls around, I will accompany folk arts specialist Deborah Bailey to a site visit in southwest Missouri to document my first ever home-hog butchering and processing. I may have to alter my career path.



Tahna Henson documents a performance at the West Plains, Mo., Old Time Music and Heritage Festival in 2007. Photo by Willow G. Mullins.

*One of the first "barn quilt squares" has been installed on a barn just south of I-70 at the Pilot Grove exit. The project will eventually lead to a driving tour in Cooper, Howard and Saline counties.