

Missouri Folk Arts Program

Mapping a Community Scholar Network in Missouri

Lisa L. Higgins
MFAP Director

The most recent edition of the *Journal of American Folklore* arrived, and I opened the cover to find Elaine J. Lawless' article *Folklore As a Map of the World: Rejecting "Home as a Failure of the Imagination."* Lawless, of course, is Curators' Professor of English and Folklore Studies here at the University of Missouri. She was my teacher and dissertation director and has been a long-time advisor to the Missouri Folk Arts Program (MFAP). In the article, Lawless guides me again, providing a metaphor for our current projects. In her writing, she reconstructs a map of her young life in the "Bootheel," that region in extreme southeast Missouri both she and I once called home (though in different counties and separated by a few years). She writes that "[g]enerally, we think of maps as outlining for us the major thoroughfares, the shapes of states, the major cities, the largest bodies of water, the broadest rivers. But maps also mark the lesser roads, the older paths, the tributaries, the points of interest along the way" (p. 144). Lawless' notion about cartography is a good metaphor for folklore, and for the work we strive for here at MFAP. The artists that we have worked with over the years often hail from the lesser roads, even in Missouri's major cities. Often a map is not enough; we need tour guides.

It has long been the work of MFAP to seek out "new" artists, more accurately

"unknown" artists, or at least those unknown beyond their local borders. Time and again, we have relied upon a network of advisors (colleagues, artists, and friends) to lead us down the older paths, to tell us about the points of interest, and to introduce us to the people who define them. In addition to that network, we have mounted field surveys by staff or consultants. In the last year, we have embarked on a new project that seeks to combine both, to revitalize the network and to inspire locally-based research. Missouri's Community Scholars Workshop Series has been mentioned in these pages once or twice. In June, we wrapped up the first series of workshops, in which we traveled to West Plains, St. Louis, and Springfield. There, we introduced thirty-three workshop participants to the field of public folk arts via fourteen workshop leaders and over twenty traditional artists. In return, they are introducing us to new points and people of interest. We are happy also to report that we have received another year of funding from the National Endowment for the Arts to continue the project. With the following images, we hope to draw an outline of the pilot Community Scholars Workshop Series.

Our Springfield workshop in June was hosted by the English Department at Missouri State, where the penultimate documentarian of Missouri old-time music, Gordon McCann (Photo 1), shared stories about jam sessions and musicians he has documented since the 1970s. Our final fieldtrip was taken during the heat of Missouri's cicada summer (Photo 2), when old-time dulcimer musician Don Graves (Photo 3), his wife and grandchildren welcomed us to their front porch in Lebanon. Participants snapped photos and recorded audio and video of Mr. Graves and family sharing songs, accompanied by the drone of dulcimers and thousands of cicadas.

The West Plains workshop kicked off in November at the Community Foundation of the Ozarks office on Veterans Day. After introductions, participants poured onto the square to document the parade (Photo 1). This workshop set the standard for all: each features an established community scholar and a fieldtrip to visit a traditional artist. Here, local journalist and singer Marideth Sisco (Photo 2) sings a Missouri tune she recorded for the *Winter's Bone* soundtrack. On Friday, participants traveled to the nearby workshop of long rifle builder Pat Nicholson (left), shown here observing powder horn construction (Photo 3).

The Folk School of St. Louis hosted the March workshop, marked by the city's rich diversity. Master storyteller and author Gladys Coggsell (Photo 1, center) shared her history of documenting Missouri's African-American traditions, from the Bootheel to Hannibal. Mandingo *gara* artist and new immigrant Mahmoud Conteh (Photo 2) described the fabrics he designs, a skill learned from an aunt in Sierra Leone before civil war forced him from his home. Participants gathered at Geoff Seitz's wonderfully cluttered violin shop where they interviewed him, documenting the visit with digital cameras and recorders (Photo 3).

