

Missouri Folk Arts Program

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MFAP Director

The Missouri Folk Arts Program has been on the road the last year, working extensively in southwest Missouri in Lawrence, Newton, Jasper, McDonald, and Barry counties. From August 2012 to September 2013, staff visited the region nine times to explore, document traditional artists, attend festivals, coordinate workshops, and meet folk arts allies. Staff, almost always accompanied by a community scholar or a University of Missouri graduate student in Folklore, spent about forty days in the field and logged thousands of miles, hundreds of digital images, and hours of video. Nearly sixty artists were identified in the region, and over thirty were documented—about twenty extensively in face-to-face interviews in communities like Ash Grove, Carthage, Cassville, Halltown, Joplin, Monett, Neosho, Noel, Oronogo, Pierce City, Pineville, Stotts City, and Southwest City.

In just the month of May, Folk Arts Specialist Deborah Bailey and Community Scholar Caryl Posada-Stillings of Ava, Missouri, documented two Cinco de Mayo events in Monett. Leaders at St. Lawrence Catholic Church estimate Latinos now represent about thirty percent of the town's population. While in the Lawrence County town, Bailey and Posada-Stillings also visited two large *mercados*, a Mexican restaurant, and La Duranguena, a dress shop specializing in *quinceanera* dresses. On a second trip that month, Bailey and Community Scholar Jami Lewis of Mt. Vernon met knife- and blade-smith Richard Ramsey at his rural Neosho workshop where he also adorns knife handles and other objects with intricate scrimshaw. The next day, Bailey and Lewis attended the 5th annual Pierce City Arts Festival. The 2013 theme was "Draw Pierce City," with a contest for artists of all ages. Bailey and Lewis, however, attended to photograph a painting exhibition by

graffiti artist Vincent "A.J." Alejandro (#1), who was commissioned by the city to produce a mural. Three days later, Bailey was joined once again by Posada-Stillings. They traveled to the home in Oronogo of cowboy poet D. J. Frye, a regular at regional festivals, who shared a few poems before they returned to Neosho to meet young fiddler Nathan Lee McAlister in a restored one room school house (#2). He was accompanied by Lee Ann and Jack Sours, who played second fiddle and rhythm guitar. McAlister was so intent to fiddle that day that he defied the latest Tornado Alley weather warning, calmly and passionately playing tunes for MFAP's audio recorder. Posada-Stillings recalls photographing this jam session and simultaneously scouting out safe shelter.

Also in May, Folk Arts Director Lisa Higgins criss-crossed paths with Bailey, traveling some of the same highways and many different county roads with Community Scholar Sarah Denton of West Plains, who photographed artists, landmarks and landscapes. They visited the farthest corner—where Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma state lines are marked by a monument dedicated by the Ozark Culture Club in 1915. Here, as in much of southwest Missouri, those borders and residents blur culturally. In Southwest City, Highway 43 turns into Main Street with cross streets that signify more cultural diversity: Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Comanche. At the corner of Choctaw and Broadway, Higgins and Denton visited "The Future Home of the Southwest City Arts Center," a former Presbyterian church built in 1886. The banner over the door says "future home," but the local arts organization had already screened a silent movie; coordinated cowboy poetry, *a cappella*, and roots music concerts; and was in production for summer theater. The Center's vice president also happens to be a traditional coiled basket weaver. Robin

Reichardt was raised in Tulsa, tends her small herd of cattle near Southwest City, and lives just over the Arkansas border. She upcycles and recycles materials into her baskets, making scraps and found objects into functional pieces (#3). Recently, Reichardt started weaving with orange twine salvaged from hay bales required to feed her cattle during the 2012 drought. She also invited John Spurling to join us (#4). A young guitarist who identifies as an "Americana" musician, Spurling hails from Southwest City, lives in Reed Springs, and plays gigs in Branson. A flat pick guitarist, Spurling explained that he took lessons at the local music store from a Cherokee man from Oklahoma. Spurling covers John Melencamp and Kris Kristofferson's songs to earn tips, and he picks fine versions of traditional rags and fiddle tunes, all the while documenting local culture in his original songs and lyrics. He played us a timely, compelling original song he calls "The Pep Talk" about the scourge of methamphetamine in a region where "417" is not only the area code but folk speech for "meth."

Time and again, what we found along the highways, county roads, and main streets of southwest Missouri surprised us, from fledgling but highly productive arts organizations in Southwest City and Mt. Vernon, to the elaborate Vietnamese Marian Days Festival in Carthage that attracts tens of thousands of pilgrims in August's triple digit heat. In Noel, Missouri,—a "Christmas City" and "canoe capital"—a Mexican restaurant and an African grocery sit opposite each other on Main Street, both catering to workers at a chicken processing plant. Off Highway 96, Jami Lewis and Folklore graduate student Darcy Holtgrave documented Gary Turner (#5), who personally sustains the legacy of Route 66 with his private collection of memorabilia, legends, and tourist information, and Lowell Davis, who has planted historic buildings in a

whimsical village, where there are regular music jams on Saturdays and gospel music on Sundays. Just to the south in Stotts City, Charles and Vicky Stearns transform vintages furs, wool coats, "letterman" jackets, and military uniforms into teddy bears that hold family folklore and reimagine local legends (#6). A little to the east in Ash Grove, Fr. Moses Berry and Nathan Boone, reclaimed his family's Century Farm, established an Eastern

Orthodox church, successfully placed his family's cemetery for "Slaves, Indians, and Paupers" on the National Historic Register, and briefly ran the small, but powerful, Ozark Afro-American History Museum on Main Street.

At the outset, MFAP staff had little idea where the roads would lead and what was in store. Several months later, we are confident that we only scratched the surface.



1. Vincent "A.J." Alejandro at the Pierce City Arts Festival. Photo by Deborah A. Bailey
 2. Lee Ann Sours and Nathan Lee McAlister in Neosho. Photo by Deborah A. Bailey
 3. Robin Reichardt's wrapped coil basket in Southwest City. Photo by Sarah Denton
 4. John Spurling outside the arts center in Southwest City. Photo by Sarah Denton
 5. Gary Turner at his Route 66 shop near Halltown. Photo by Darcy Holtgrave
 6. Stearns Bears shop in Stotts City. Photo by Pete Bradshaw, Ozark Light Writer
 7. Fr. Moses Berry at his museum with Deborah Bailey and Clarence Brewer. Photo by Pete Bradshaw, Ozark Light Writer
- Background image: County road near historic Goss Cemetery, Lawrence County. Photo by Sarah Denton