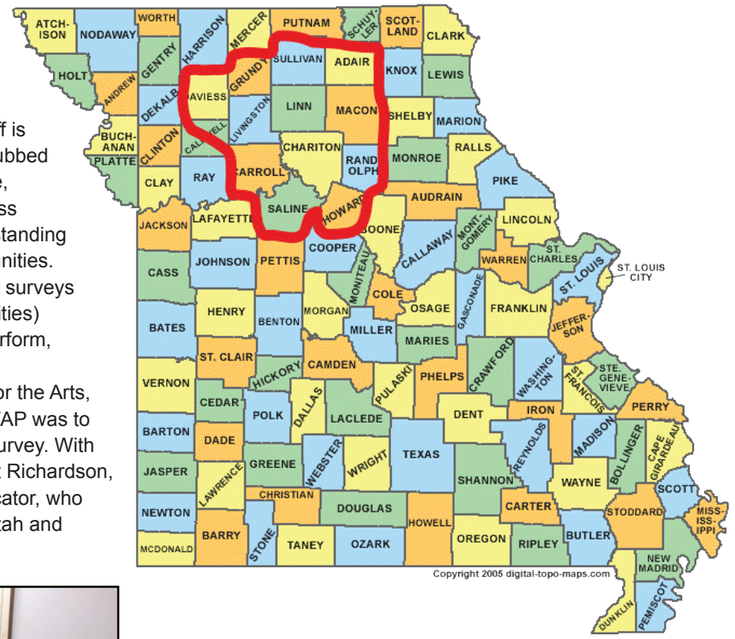
Missouri Folk Arts Program

Lisa L. Higgins
Director

The Missouri Folk Arts Program (MFAP) staff is excited about a new multi-year initiative, dubbed "Show-Me Folk," to identify, then to engage, new-to-us traditional artists region by region across Missouri. The hope is to engender deeper understanding of both established and emerging cultural communities. We envision a twofold plan, including annual field surveys (alternating annually from rural to urban communities) and opportunities for newly-identified artists to perform, demonstrate, and exhibit their traditions.

With funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the first step for the Missouri Arts Council and MFAP was to hire a professional folklorist to conduct the field survey. With input from stakeholders, we chose Thomas Grant Richardson, a folklorist, ethnomusicologist, and museum educator, who most recently conducted successful surveys in Utah and abroad.



Richardson drove many rural highways, including this one near Clark, Mo., in Randolph County, home of a vibrant Amish community that makes traditional furniture, baskets, rugs, quilts, toys, and food for purchase by the general public.

Thomas Richardson and Folk Arts Specialist Debbie Bailey discussed fieldwork equipment over lunch in the Folk Arts offices at Mizzou North. After lunch, Richardson headed north along Highway 63.

In early December 2017, Richardson made his initial visit to Missouri, where he met with project partners and advisers in and near this year's target region—thirteen rural counties north of Interstate 70, including Howard, Adair, Daviess, Saline, and counties between. The highlighted counties historically share geology, settlement patterns, and some traditions. Older immigrants, for instance, hailed from Ireland and Germany, while more recent immigrants arrived from countries including El Salvador, Peru, and central Africa.

During Richardson's first trip, he explored along several highways, including 13, 36, and 63. He visited Kirksville, Macon, Clark, Gallatin, and Hamilton with brief stops in Columbia, Kansas City, and St. Louis. He filled his notebook with leads and has just begun to fill a one terabyte hard drive with photographic images, video, and audio. When Richardson submitted his first report from the field, he noted, "My initial findings support my belief that traditional arts are alive and well in every pocket of this country. In Missouri, I met with several fantastic artists and community organizers and witnessed some of the most genuine expressions of dedication to sustainable, community-oriented, traditional arts."

Now back at home in New Mexico, Richardson is mapping his next Missouri visit. In March, he will return for scheduled stops to document several individual traditional artists in the designated region. Based on his findings, MFAP will co-host a small exhibition and performances at Missouri Valley College (MVC), a partner in the region, to highlight traditions identified in the project. MVC Professor Claire Schmidt (University of Missouri alum) and MVC Honors College students will work with Richardson and MFAP staff to plan the event.

This first field survey represents an annual commitment, as MFAP continues its work to discover regional traditions; to coordinate public activities, featuring local artists with regional partners; and to bolster the strength and infrastructure of Missouri's folk and traditional arts, artists, and cultural communities. Join us on our website and social media this spring as we answer the questions "Where's Thomas? Who did he meet and what did he eat today?" ■

Richardson interviewed members of the Hands of Friendship Quilt Guild, a Kirksville, Mo., organization established in 1986. Andrea O'Brien (left) and Alice Allinson not only showed off their latest quilts and tools, they also shared stories about the tragic December 2016 fire at the Kirksville Arts Association. The organization's historic building was a total loss, as well as most quilts in a special guild exhibition. Both O'Brien and Allinson lost works in the fire.

Richardson suspected that one introduction to the local Mexican community in Sullivan County's Milan, Mo., would be through foodways. He not only enjoyed a traditional meal at Taqueria San Marcos but struck up conversation with restaurateur Marcos Osorio about Latino traditions in the area. Richardson also gave Osorio's restaurant top marks—high praise from a food aficionado and resident of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Photos: Lisa Higgins and Thomas Grant Richardson

Missouri Arts Council

ART WORKS.

National Endowment for the Arts