

A Tribute to Master Artist John "Preston" Williams

Missouri Folk Arts Program



by Lisa Higgins, Director
Missouri Folk Arts Program

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Over the weekend, we learned the saddest news. Master blacksmith John "Preston" Williams, Sr. died in a tree cutting accident. Only 60 years old, he is gone way too soon and missed by so many.

MFAP Folk Arts Specialist Debbie Bailey recalls first meeting John Preston Williams, Sr. and his father John B. Williams, Jr. in rural Monroe County during a 2003 field survey of northeast Missouri to identify traditional artists in the region (a project we affectionately called "finding NE MO").

A couple of years later, Preston applied for the 2006 Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program with apprentice Melvin Williams (no relation). Preston credited his father (and ancestors before him) with passing on the art of blacksmithing.

The elder Mr. Williams was a machinist and welder in the Navy during WWI, and he built a foundry and shop at his farm, where Preston grew up. With that training, as well as working with the local blacksmith in nearby Moberly, Preston Williams was "hooked." He and his father became known in the region for their wainright and wheelright skills; all advertised locally by word-of-mouth. Preston prided himself on making functional items, especially tools of his trade: anvils, power hammers, and other smithing tools. Preston also made items for hunting, trapping, and cooking, and the occasional whimsical piece of yard art.



Debbie Bailey says of Preston: "He was smart, funny, could talk your ear off, and had a good and generous heart."

Preston was an early member of the Blacksmiths' Association of Missouri, where he formed lifelong friendships, and a Bethel Youth Fiddle Camp parent due to his son John's participation as a student and now instructor. Most recently, at MFAP, we have seen Preston and Tammy, his wife, at fiddle events in proud support of John, now a TAAP master artist himself, in old-time fiddling.

We send our sincerest condolences to all of Preston's family and friends, especially Tammy, John, and Jullia. RIP.

Preston's family has posted an obituary here:

<http://www.caterfuneralhomeinc.com/obits/obituary.php?id=686506>