



Folk Arts

What's in your backyard?

Discovering Diversity through Missouri Folk Arts

By Lisa Rathje Taylor

Folk Arts: Also called traditional arts, folk arts are passed down informally by word of mouth or imitation in close-knit communities, families, ethnic, regional, religious or occupational groups. They encompass many forms including crafts, music, dance, verbal arts, and food-ways.

Nestled in beautiful rolling hills and breathtaking vistas, Christa Robbins twists more than one hundred wooden bobbins around to create an amazingly intricate, centuries-old, German bobbin-lace design. Amid the smoke and noise of firecrackers, a dragon comes to life as a part of the Vietnamese New Year celebration. In the heat of a small blacksmith shop, Ray Joe Hastings hand forges and hammers a block of metal into a Current River style gig that he will use fishing later. During an emotional jam session, the Sitze family plays American bluegrass gospel that combines worship and praise with a high level of musicianship.

These folk artists and folk-arts are examples of the cultural diversity and creativity that exists in our own backyards and communities throughout Missouri. Learning about folklore and the folk arts is not just learning about “old stuff.” Indeed, the folk arts remain vital in communities today, providing education, a sense of heritage and community identity, economic development, an outlet for creative acts, and even a forum for political messages. Folk arts change and adapt over time reflecting modern realities and artistic innovations of individual artists. An important program that identifies and honors master traditional artists within Missouri is the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program (TAAP) administered by the Missouri Folk Arts Program (MFAP). The program is designed to assist in the conservation and perpetuation of Missouri's traditional arts and heritage. This year 10 teams of masters and their apprentices were selected from 31 applications to participate in the program administered by MFAP with funding from both the National Endowment for the Arts, the Missouri Arts Council and the University of Missouri-Columbia.

As a graduate student intern for the Missouri Folk Arts Program, I perform a variety of tasks within the MFAP office. One of the best parts of this internship is traveling with Debbie Bailey, the Folk Arts Specialist, to watch these master artists at work. At each site, I observe and document as they create a part of our Missouri heritage.

My first visit as an intern brought me to the Dixon, MO, area to meet with lace-maker Christa Robbins and her two apprentices Linda Hickman and Gwendolyn Ann Workman. Ms. Robbins first learned *Kloppelei* (German bobbin lace) in 1936 as a youth in Germany from her local *Kloppelschule* (bobbin lace school). By the age of twelve, she was selling her lacework. After meeting her American husband, she moved to Missouri, bringing with her many of the old patterns from her *Kloppelschule* that she saved when the school closed during World War II.

Click-ity, click-ity, click, click . . . the sound of her shuffling bobbins

fills the room as we watch, in vain, to reason out what her flying fingers do with the bobbins. Her fingers, sure of the old patterns, create perfect order out of knots and art out of the linen string. Her apprentices work diligently over their own stands, throwing the bobbins from one hand to the other, but they stop frequently to examine and call Ms. Robbins over. It is her critical eye that can discern the pattern of knots to find the problem. The apprentices' are working hard to become masters in *Kloppelei* themselves so that they may also someday pass on this folk art to others.

My second TAAP visit brought me to St. Louis, MO, where we celebrated the arrival of the Year of the Horse with the Vietnamese community and a master artist of the dragon dance, Hai Ngoc Vu. The dragon dance is considered one of the most beautiful and difficult traditional Vietnamese dances to perform. Today, Lan Hoang, apprentice to Mr. Hai, will perform with other members of the community. The dance starts abruptly when a metal tin in the middle of the floor suddenly erupts with firecrackers. The noise of the firecrackers will keep away the evil and undesirable spirits. From behind the light and smoke of the firecrackers, the dragon comes to life.

Throughout the dance, the performers demonstrate amazing athletic prowess. Everyone involved in the procession constantly moves about using dance, theatrics, and acrobatics to keep the head and legs of the dragon coordinated. At the climax, the dragon dancers precariously balance upon both one another and a chair, creating an impressive towering dragon whose mouth opens to spit out the banner saying (in Vietnamese), “Welcome to all the guests of honor.” The drum at this point beats louder and faster than it has yet in the ceremony. The audience's reaction to this is fantastic. Their clapping and hollering fills the whole place with noise. I left the ceremony awed by the costuming and coordination of the Dragon dancers.

My last two site visits took me to the southern Missouri Ozarks. As we passed the traditional architecture of the area, manifested in stone houses and crossed rivers that informed so many of the local traditions, I could not believe how beautiful this area of the state is, let alone how rich this area is in terms of traditional arts.

Walking into the Sitze's family café in Fredericktown, MO, one can not help but notice the bluegrass instruments lining the top of the





buffet. Most striking is the large bass fiddle, but banjos and guitars can also be seen. The Sitze family includes three brothers, their parents, and their grandfather, M. G. Sitze, a master artist in our TAAP program. All of these members play an important role in the family bluegrass group; however, today we are here to observe M. G. Sitze mentor his grandsons Chad and Dennijo on bluegrass dobro. Dobro is a type of resonator guitar played in the lap, often fretted with a steel bar in the player's left hand, and the strings finger picked with the right hand. Already accomplished contemporary bluegrass musicians, the grandsons are focusing on their grandfather's older, local style of bluegrass dobro.

As with many musical traditional arts, learning comes from watching and listening during jam sessions. It was only a year ago that Mr. Sitze lost his wife who played the big bass fiddle with the family, and her spirit infuses much of the session and conversation. With tears in his eyes, Mr. Sitze's fingers pluck at the strings with amazing speed and accuracy as the brothers accompany him on their own instruments—singing songs that they have played together since they were youths. When their turn comes to play dobro, it becomes obvious that they have already ingrained the basic premise of the structure of the music from their previous playing and listening experiences. As the technique comes, so does their confidence. At the end of the session one brother performs an old traditional tune on the dobro, to which Mr. Sitze simply nods his head and smiles his approval.

Finally, a little further south and over quite a number more hills lies Ray Joe Hastings' house at a bend in the Current River. We first visited the historical museum in Doniphan, MO, where Mr. Hastings' extensive collection of antique gigs is publicly displayed. A gig is a steel object in the shape of a fork or trident used to spear fish. "Gigging" or using a gig is the traditional way to fish in the shallow clear waters of the Ozark waterways.

Later, in the heat of Mr. Hastings' small blacksmith's shop, it is clear that he is not only a collector but also a master artist of making gigs in the Ozark waterway tradition. Carefully he builds his fire, contained in a forge he constructed from an oil-barrel. Then begins

the process of carefully, yet quickly, using a hammer and chisel to create the four prongs of the gig. Continually Mr. Hastings goes through the process of heating, hammering, chiseling, and re-heating the metal. There is an art to the timing, as well as the placement of the chisel. Chipping off too much or too little can result in losing an important piece of the metal and ruining the gig. Combining utility and art, Mr. Hastings continues a long and increasingly endangered tradition of Ozark gig-making in his shed and shop.

Missouri has a treasure of traditional arts, as my current internship with the Missouri Folk Arts Program (MFAP) makes abundantly clear. When I first moved to Missouri from Iowa, I planned to only stay a year to volunteer with the Americorps*VISTA program. However, a year came and went, leaving me here in Missouri as a graduate student that had to figure out how to make my education as worthwhile as my volunteer experience. The study of folklore, while academically rigorous, also engages students with the "real world" outside of texts and journal articles. I find that through my folklore studies I can continue to work within my community—not only as an academic doing research—but as a partner. I can use my knowledge of cultural expression to affect positive changes and/or relationships within communities. My internship with MFAP creates a second learning environment that has taught this Iowan not only about the practical issues of public folklore, but also exposed me to all of the wonderful folk arts that are alive and well in Missouri.



From left to right

- *Kloppelei* by Christa Robbins near Dixon, Missouri. Christa created the pattern and design of this piece, drawing on her knowledge of old patterns dating back to the 18th and 19th centuries. Photo by Deborah A. Bailey, January 2002.
- Dragon Dancers with apprentice Lan Hoang manipulating the head of the dragon balance on top of one another at the Vietnamese Lunar New Year Festival, St. Louis, Missouri. Photo by Deborah A. Bailey, February 2002.
- Chad Sitze (left) and M.G. Sitze (right) playing an old bluegrass tune on their dobros in Fredricktown, Missouri. Photo by Lisa Rathje Taylor, May 2002.
- Ray Joe Hastings hammering and chiseling red hot metal to form the prongs of the gig in his shop, near Doniphan, Missouri. Photo by Deborah A. Bailey, May 2002.