



Photo by Dana Everts-Boehm

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"... and the winner is"—Mrs. Gladys A. Cogswell, a master traditional artist in African-American storytelling from Frankford, Mo., will be the recipient of the 2005 Missouri Arts Award in the Individual Artist category. This prestigious award is the state's highest honor bestowed in the Arts. The Missouri Arts Council (MAC) initiated the Missouri Arts Award in 1983 to "recognize and honor those individuals and organizations whose contributions to the arts in Missouri have produced lasting and profoundly positive effects upon the artistic and cultural landscape of Missouri." Gladys Cogswell is just such a cultural heritage icon.

Raised in an urban community in Patterson, New Jersey, Gladys inherited an extensive body of African-American narratives, including folktales, legends and family sagas told to her by her great grandmother, Marie Wallace Cofer and her great grandfather, nicknamed "Uncle Pete." Mrs. Cofer recounted family history extending back six generations, particularly centered on stories about her own grandmother known as "Mammy Kay," who was captured in Africa along with her parents and sold into slavery. Uncle Pete told tall tales, animal "trickster" tales and explanatory legends. These stories or "lessons," as Gladys frequently refers to them, communicated messages about struggle, resilience, and resistance as well as imparted moral and cultural values.

"My great-grandmother had a story for everything. She even disciplined us children (Gladys and her sister) with stories when we were bad—which in my case was often." Gladys frequently recounts the story of the "Man whose heaaaaaaad (head) fell off because he lied so much. I was so scared when she told me that story I was good for a long time after that—for a whole week!"

Gladys embodies artistic excellence in the traditional

art of storytelling, selected six times as a master artist in the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program (TAAP), funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the MAC. She is recognized throughout Missouri and indeed nationally for her storytelling performances, workshops, storytelling conferences and educational programs encompassing all ages. She works with children in the classroom across Missouri and as far away as Alaska. She has devoted endless hours of volunteer time, serving as President and board member of the Missouri Folklore Society and as the founder of the northeast's first regional storytelling guild, "By Word of Mouth."

Gladys has performed in the Peoples Republic of China as a national storytelling delegate to that country. She was one of a select group of traditional artists chosen from around the country to participate in American Traditions, a professional development program funded by the National Endowment for the Arts to build audiences for folk and traditional arts performances. In 2003, she was chosen to be a featured storyteller at the prestigious National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tenn. The list of her professional accomplishments is endless.

In a recent letter written in support of Gladys' nomination, historian and editor of the *Missouri Heritage Series*, University of Missouri Press, Rebecca Schroeder wrote:

Gladys Cogswell can only be described as a national treasure, and her enormous contributions to the artistic and educational life of Missouri in the past two decades are beyond measure. Those who have heard Gladys perform have experienced the power of her artistry as a storyteller . . . Whatever their ages her audiences are drawn into the world she evokes in her performances and always emerge with a better understanding of the human condition . . . I can think of no one more deserving of a Missouri Arts Award.

Perhaps less well known is the invaluable and lasting contribution she has made to the cultural and artistic landscape of Missouri through her efforts to preserve African-American storytelling particularly in northeast Missouri, her adopted home. How she and her husband Truman Cogswell, Sr., ended up in northeast Missouri is a story in itself.

We often would go camping in northeast Missouri and do some exploring. One trip, we took the Frankford exit (off RT. 61) and we

stopped at the Daisy Patch (the local craft, gift, coffee shop and hangout). I stepped out of the car and I had this incredible sense like I'd been here before . . . I fell in love with Frankford—all five blocks of it! I told Truman right then and there that he was going to have to buy me a house here . . . Truman said "whaaaaaat?!!"



Photo by Deborah Bailey

Truman did buy Gladys a small house in Frankford. Built in 1847 and formerly owned by a freedman of color, the house has been their home for twenty-four years. Their new home was also in the region often called "Little Dixie," with a significant history of African-American presence stemming from the nineteenth-century migration of slave-owning settlers from the South into the area.

Gladys began to hear a rich, rural and highly localized oral tradition told by elderly African-American residents in the Hannibal-Frankford, Louisiana-Bowling Green area. She recognized that this tradition, like her own, included family histories, genealogies and stories about local places and historical events not found in any Missouri or regional history book. She also realized that for a myriad of reasons these traditions were in significant danger of dying out and being lost forever.

Gladys has worked tirelessly as a traditional artist and community scholar to document these stories via interviews, to perpetuate storytelling by teaching others, and to publicly present the stories of her family and those told by residents of northeast Missouri. Over the last twenty years, Gladys has collected hundreds of oral narratives from African Americans in the northeast. She also conducted oral history research among both white and black residents about an area located near Louisiana, Missouri, known by locals as "Little Africa," and identified in oral tradition as a hiding place for runaway slaves. "Little Africa" later became an all black community settled by former slaves after Emancipation. Today only the cemetery remains.

Stories spill out of Gladys naturally, in everyday conversation, as if she was born telling them. She is one of the most creative and compelling storytellers I have ever heard. Some of my favorite times involve listening to her over a cup of coffee or tea while sitting at her kitchen table in Frankford. Gladys has the ability to make me laugh and cry, sometimes at the same moment. In more private contexts and among adults, her stories sometimes reflect periods of pain, struggle and loss she has experienced in her life as well as great humor, strength and joy.

In an interview, published in the *Hannibal Courier-Post* on March 19, 2003, Gladys spoke about loss, memory and story:

My great grandmother was my life and when I lost her, I went looking for replacements . . . I didn't have the sense to tape record my great grandmother, but I remember many of her lessons. She had mother wit, and she had stories. I have had several surrogate grandmothers (in the Hannibal area) for which I am very grateful. I have lost them all, however, but I am strengthened knowing their spirits are with me at all times. I have memories and stories that make me laugh, cry, think and pray.

Gladys will present a program on African American storytelling at the Museum of Art and Archaeology, Feb. 2, 2005, starting at 12:15 p.m. The voices of her late great-grandmother Marie Wallace Cofer and her surrogate grandmothers from northeast, Missouri, the late Dorine Ambers and Lucille Morrison (Granny Lucy) will surely be present.

Gladys will be honored in a public ceremony in the State Capitol rotunda in Jefferson City, Mo., on Feb. 9, 2005, starting at 2:00 p.m.



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