Missouri Folk Arts Program

Mapping a Community Scholar Network in Missouri

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The most recent edition of the Journal of American Folklore arrived, and I opened the cover to find Elaine J. Lawless’ article Folklore As a Map of the World: Rejecting “Home as a Failure of the Imagination.” Lawless, of course, is Curators’ Professor of English and Folklore Studies here at the University of Missouri. She was my teacher and dissertation director and has been a long-time advisor to the Missouri Folk Arts Program (MFAP). In the article, Lawless guides me again, providing a metaphor for our current projects. In her writing, she reconstructs a map of her young life in the “Bootheel,” that region in extreme southeast Missouri both she and I once called home (though in different counties and separated by a few years). She writes that “[g]enerally, we think of maps as outlining for us the major thoroughfares, the shapes of states, the major cities, the largest bodies of water, the broadest rivers. But maps also mark the lesser roads, the older paths, the tributaries, the points of interest along the way” (p. 144). Lawless’ notion about cartography is a good metaphor for folklore, and for the work we strive for here at MFAP. It has long been the work of MFAP to seek out “new” artists, more accurately “unknown” artists, or at least those unknown beyond their local borders. Time and again, we have relied upon a network of advisors (colleagues, artists, and friends) to lead us down the older paths, to tell us about the points of interest, and to introduce us to the people who define them. In addition to that network, we have mounted field surveys by staff or consultants. In the last year, we have embarked on a new project that seeks to combine both, to revitalize the network and to inspire locally-based research. Missouri’s Community Scholars Workshop Series has been mentioned in these pages once or twice. In June, we wrapped up the first series of workshops, in which we traveled to West Plains, St. Louis, and Springfield. There, we introduced thirty-three workshop participants to the field of public folk arts via fourteen workshop leaders and over twenty traditional artists. In return, they are introducing us to new points and people of interest. We are happy also to report that we have received another year of funding from the National Endowment for the Arts to continue the project. With the following images, we hope to draw an outline of the pilot Community Scholars Workshop Series.