

MISSOURI  
MASTERS  
&  
THEIR TRADITIONAL ARTS

# “¡Qué Viva el Westside!”

Mexican Traditional Arts in Kansas City, Missouri



Photograph by Dana Everts-Boehm, 1993

“Mariachi México” serenades the bride and groom at a wedding in Kansas City.

Featuring Beto López and Mariachi México

By

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Dana Everts-Boehm

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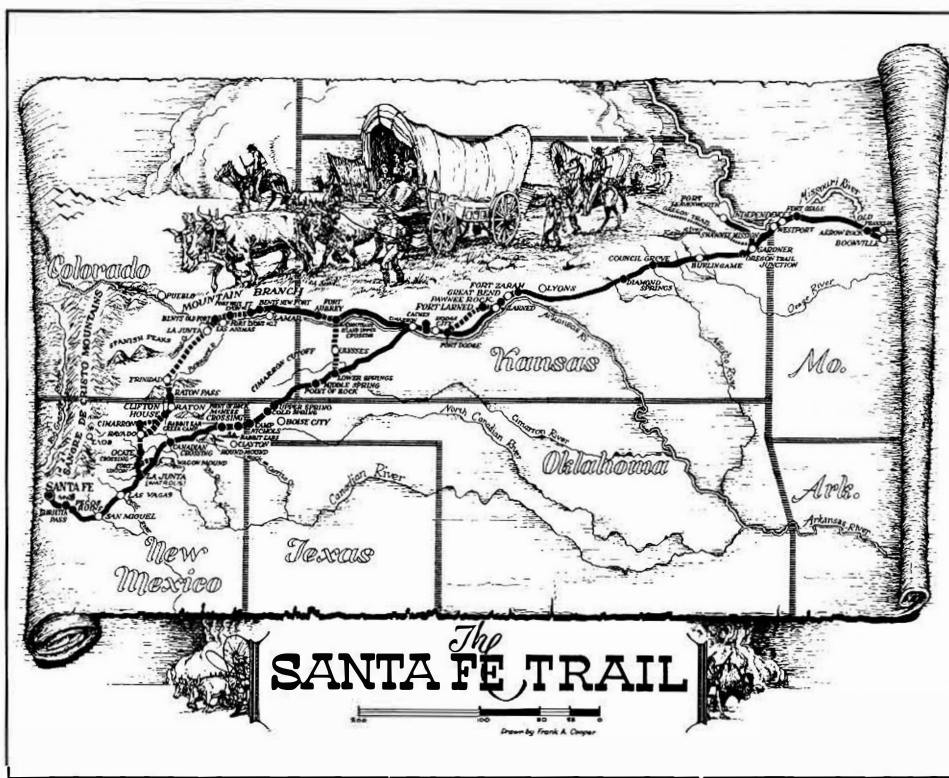
Missouri Folk Arts Program

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Spring, 1993



MISSOURI FOLK ARTS PROGRAM



Courtesy the Kansas Heritage center, Dodge City, Kansas. Drawn by Frank A. Cooper

Kansas City, Missouri's Westside is the home of a thriving Mexican American population. A host of visual markers distinguish this part of the city, including vivid murals on buildings and cars, bathtub yard shrines housing statues of the Virgin Mary, Mexican flags, and countless fliers stapled on to telephone poles proclaiming "¡Gran Baile!" -- community dances featuring both local and imported bands. One such local band, "Mariachi México," plays frequently for community events. The leader of "Mariachi México," Heriberto (Beto) López, Sr., is currently a master artist for Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program, tutoring apprentice Antonio Sierra, Jr. in the art of mariachi trumpet playing. This essay is largely based on interviews with Mr. López, Mr. Sierra, and three staff members at Kansas City's Guadalupe Center: Cristobal Medina, Cecilia Ysaac, and John Fierro. English translations of excerpts from interviews conducted in Spanish are added in parentheses.

## PART ONE

### History of the Mexican Presence in Kansas City, Missouri

Mexican *arrieros* (pack train guides and traders) began coming to Missouri via the Santa Fe Trail when it first opened in 1821. The magnitude of the trade on this route was impressive: it is reported to have employed on the average ten thousand men annually and required six thousand mules, twenty-eight thousand oxen, and three thousand wagons.<sup>1</sup> Prominent Mexican and New Mexican pack train entrepreneurs often sent their children to

schools in Independence, Westport, and Saint Louis, Missouri.<sup>2</sup> One such trader, Estevan Ochoa from Chihuahua, Mexico, resided for a considerable time in Independence before establishing a highly successful pack train system and chain of stores on the Trail in 1859.<sup>3</sup> History reveals that the term "greaser" originally referred to the Mexicans who greased the wagon wheels along the Santa Fe Trail.<sup>4</sup>

When the Mexican Revolution broke out in 1911-12, causing fully one tenth of the population of Mexico to flee their native land, Kansas City -- a site already familiar to Mexican traders -- became one of the many destinations in the United States for the refugees. Kansas City's

principal attraction for Mexican immigrants was not its familiarity, but jobs. American railroad companies began recruiting labor from Mexico and the American Southwest in the early 1900s. The Santa Fe Railroad recruited 155 Mexicans to lay track from Kansas City to California in 1905, and a number of these workers later made Kansas City their home.<sup>5</sup> One of the first large concentrations of Mexican population in the city was a boxcar settlement on the Westside on "la veinticuatro" (24th Street). Cristobal Medina, the Director of Kansas City's Guadalupe Center, explains:

"If you look at the locations of the railroads here in Kansas City, they straddle the state lines. And therefore, you had, you know,

neighborhoods...we settled close to the adjoining area. And on the Missouri side you had the West Side, Sheffield, East Bottoms. [On the] Kansas side, you had Argentine, Armourdale, Rosedale. Those were the traditional, old neighborhoods of Mexican concentration. Initially it was the railroads; after that, the packing houses also needed a large labor force. After they saw there was such a need here for work and that they wanted additional people, they moved their families up. And that's how some of the first families located here."<sup>6</sup>

When a federal policy calling for the forced deportation of Mexican laborers and their families was instituted during the Depression, Kansas City's Mexican community dwindled from an estimated 10,000 to 2,500.<sup>7</sup> The second Bracero program initiated in the 1940s and a steady population growth since then have brought the number of Hispanics in the larger Kansas City metropolitan area up to 45,200, according to the 1990 Census Report. 76% are of Mexican ancestry and of these, 80% are American born.<sup>8</sup>

One of the nation's oldest Hispanic based organizations is Kansas City's Guadalupe Center, which was founded in 1919 by the Amberg Club, a social club of the Catholic Diocese. Dr. Thomas Purcell, a prominent Irish American, was the pri-

mary force behind the creation of the Guadalupe Center. The original purpose of the organization was to provide social services to the Mexican immigrants who had settled on Kansas City's Westside. According to Mr. Medina:

"There were other social service providers here. But at the time, due to social discrimination, they would not serve our people. The travesty was that our people didn't even feel welcome at the Catholic churches and therefore did not attend on a regular basis. They set up masses in storefronts down the street and even in a box car."<sup>9</sup>

Mr. Medina has this information first hand from family accounts, as his own grandparents -- natives of San Luis Potosí and Guadalajara, Mexico, arrived in Kansas City, via Texas, in 1919.

In 1922, the Catholic diocese purchased what had previously been a Swedish Lutheran Church on the Westside and turned it into Our Lady Of Guadalupe Catholic Church, to specifically serve Mexican parishioners. The church, like the center, was named after the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's patron saint.<sup>10</sup> Mr. Medina comments on the symbolic importance of "La Guadalupeana" to people of Mexican descent:

"The Spanish brought the Catholic religion

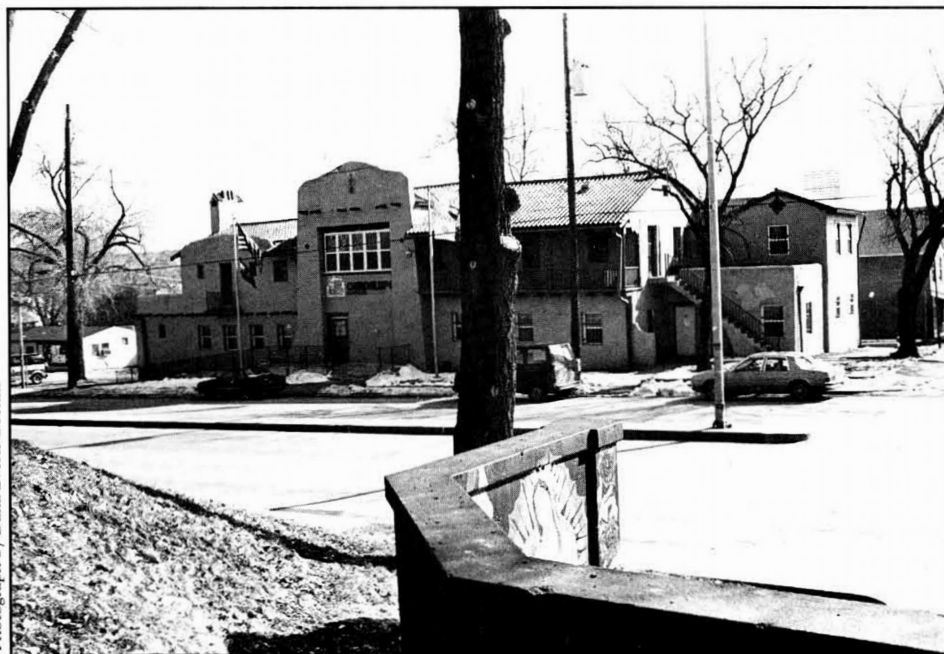


Photograph by Dana Everts-Boehm

The Virgin of Guadalupe, detail of the Gage Park Mural. Painted by Juan Moya and assistants, 1991.

to Mexico. And they weren't too successful in converting the indigenous people to their religion until the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe to Juan Diego back in the 1500s. She took the appearance of an Indian person. She's not fair complected, she's morena as we say, dark brown eyes, dark brown hair, so she really looks like one of our people. They saw her as a mother, and it really helped the conversion of the indigenous population to Catholicism. Even those who don't practice the religion have a deep respect for her in the culture. This year, in fact, the Diocese of Kansas City had a city-wide Our Lady of Guadalupe Feast Day, and it was fantastic. They had Indian dancers, a city wide Hispanic chorus, they had mariachis play later on."<sup>11</sup>

Since its founding, the Guadalupe Center has promoted cultural and artistic events such as the 1992 Feast Day for Our Lady of Guadalupe, in addition to providing social services. One of the Center's earliest fiestas was held in 1926 with a reported attendance of 5,000 community members. Dancers and musicians from the Guadalupe Center were featured at the first "Jubilesta" or "Southwest Folk Festival," held in the Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City in 1936. Performers from the Guadalupe Center journeyed to Chicago



The Guadalupe Center in Kansas City's Westside.

in 1937 and Washington, D.C. in 1938 to participate in two National Folk Festivals.<sup>12</sup>

The Guadalupe Center separated from the Catholic Diocese in 1974, when it became a community-based organization. The agency now has a Hispanic staff of 28 full time, 32 part time employees, and over 200 volunteers. Cris Medina feels that promoting cultural and artistic activities continues to be an important focus of the Center, and one that they would like to expand. He comments:

"It goes back to the self esteem thing. We need kids to feel good about who they are. And to know that, we need to know about our culture, our language, where we came from, how we got here. There really is a thirst for knowledge. We've been asked by a lot of people for Mexican culinary classes, piñata making, crafts, Spanish conversational classes."<sup>13</sup>

## PART TWO

### Mexican and Mexican American Traditional Arts and Folklife in Kansas City

A wide variety of folk art forms are practiced by Kansas City's Mexican American population. These fall into three basic categories: 1. traditions that were brought from Mexico and have continued to be passed down from the original immigrants (such as mariachi music); 2. traditions that have recently been rediscovered or "revitalized" (such as Day of the Dead); and 3. traditions that have developed in this country (such as "barrio arts").

Many of the folk arts which flourish today in the Westside are associated with fiestas: religious, civic, cultural, and private. Major religious festivities celebrated include the feast day for the Virgin of Guadalupe on December 12, *Las Posadas* during the Christmas season, Holy Week, and a number of saints days throughout the year. Civic and cultural events include *Cinco de Mayo* (fifth of May) which celebrates the Battle of Puebla, Mexican Independence Day on September sixteenth, Hispanic Heritage Month (from Septem-

ber 16 through October 15), and *Día de los Muertos* or Day of the Dead on October 31 through November 2. In addition, there are countless private fiestas celebrated throughout the year including baptisms, weddings, graduations, anniversaries, birthday parties, and *quinceañeras* or fifteenth birthday coming out parties for girls.<sup>14</sup> All of this is not counting, of course, the weekly community dances, the special masses and church activities.

These festivities are the focal point for the continued use and production of numerous folk art forms, including traditional festive foods, music and dance, special clothing such as the elaborate *quinceañera* gowns or regional outfits for *baile folklórico* dancers, and miniature clay skeletons made for the Day of the Dead altar. Speaking in admiring terms of her mother, seamstress/cook Rosa Ysaac, Guadalupe Center's Cultural Affairs Coordinator Cecilia Ysaac says:

"My mother is one of the best cooks. Well, I'm biased of course, but she's catered a lot of weddings in her time. I must say *hermole* [a rich, dark brown sauce made of chocolate and chile] is unique. And she's a beautiful seamstress. The Jalisco type dresses with the full skirt and the ribbons and the head pieces, it's

hard to make that. She makes things for my godmother's dance company, Rose Marie's *Fiesta Mexicana*. She's very, very talented."<sup>15</sup>

Gilbert Guerrero, Guadalupe Center's Associate Director of Youth and Education, makes miniature skeletons out of clay for Day of the Dead altars. In his travels to Mexico he was struck by the omnipresence of Day of the Dead toys such as sugar skulls and miniature skeletons made of clay or paper maché that appear in the markets in late October. These humorous skeletons are dressed and posed in a host of activities normally associated with the living, such as playing in a band, getting married, or driving a bus. Mr. Guerrero's figurines are used to decorate the large altar made for Day of the Dead at Our Lady of Guadalupe Elementary School, which include *papel picado* (cut paper) and paper flowers made by a visiting Mexican artist.

Unlike Day of the Dead altars, which have been recently introduced to the area, home altars and yard shrines featuring statues or images of popular saints are common throughout the Westside and have a long history here. Such altars and shrines, often decorated with electric lights, paper or plastic flowers, photographs,



"Mariachi México" plays at a wedding in Kansas City on February 6, 1993. Pictured from left to right are: Beto López, Luis Gómez, Tomás "Tito" Nelgoza, and Jorge Vásquez. "Tito," Beto's brother-in-law, was filling in for two members who couldn't be there.

Photograph by Dana Everts-Boehm



and candles, reflect the continuing importance of Mexican folk Catholicism in this urban enclave.

Music and dance forms flourishing among Kansas City's Latinos represent an amazing range. On the more traditional end of the music pole one finds mariachi bands, Spanish choirs, *corrido* singers, guitarists and romantic trios, and Tex-Mex *conjunto* bands playing the popular *música norteña* or *rancheras* (literally, "northern music" or "country songs," so called because they originated on the ranches in northern Mexico and the U.S. borderlands). Electric dance bands play a mixture of traditional music, American rock and roll (often vintage fifties) and Latin American popular tunes such as *cumbias* (originally a folk music from Colombia featuring African syncopation, now popular throughout Latin America and the American Southwest). Many *norteño* bands are brought up from Mexico, such as two groups advertised on a recent flier, "Los Terribles del Norte" and "Grupo Invasión" -- both names appearing to refer playfully to American nativistic paranoia of Mexican immigration. Latin jazz and salsa are also popular and featured regularly at dances and events.

The more traditional dances include social dancing, notably polkas, waltzes, *cumbias*, a two-step danced to *rancheras* sometimes called a *corrido* step, and *baile folklórico* or folkloric dance. There are two major *baile folklórico* ensembles in the greater Kansas City metropolitan area, "El Grupo Atotonilco Juvenil," sponsored by the Guadalupe Center and led by María and Enrique Chaurand on the Missouri side, and "Rose Marie's Fiesta Mexicana" on the Kansas side. More recent groups include "Los Primos," "Los Bailadores," and "Mexitli." *Baile folklórico* groups generally perform a variety of Mexican regional folk dances primarily from the states of Jalisco, Durango, Chihuahua, and Veracruz. Regional costumes are generally purchased in Mexico, but some of them are copied from Mexican originals and made locally

# GRAN BAILE

ANTES \$13
CAÑONAZO MUSICAL NORTEÑO  
DIRECTAMENTE DE MEXICO
PUERTA \$15

## FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 26

EXITOS COMO  
MUJERES  
VAIENTES  
LA MUERTE  
DE LOS  
PONSECA  
EL EMIGRANTE  
LOS DOS  
DE GUERRERO  
CARLOS Y  
ROSENDA  
LA NINA  
AL CAPONE



EL CARRO  
NEGRO  
VICKY  
MORENITA  
LINDA  
MARTIN Y  
LAURO  
LA MUERTE  
DE MARIE LEE  
CAMINO DE  
GUANAJUATO  
AMIGOS

EXPECTACULO GRANDE SHOW DE LUCES  
LOS AMOS Y SEÑORES DEL ACORDEON Y BAJO SEXTO  
CATALOGADOS EN LA MEJOR MUSICA NORTEÑA EN MEXICO Y USA

### LOS TERRIBLES DEL NORTE Y GRUPO INVACION

ANTES \$13.00 PUERTA \$15.00

## RAINBOW CENTER

6220 KANSAS AVENUE  
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Flier advertising two dance bands from Mexico that were scheduled to play for a local dance on February 16, 1993.

by seamstresses such as Rosa Ysaac, or the dancers themselves and their parents.

Weddings, birthdays, anniversaries and other private festivities often feature two music groups: a traditional band, such as a mariachi or a trio, followed by an electric dance band. *Baile folklórico* ensembles perform at cultural and civic events such as Fiesta Hispana, Cinco de Mayo, street fairs and festivals.

Verbal arts including song texts, proverbs, riddles, and prayers are also passed down, some of which, however, do not survive the translation to English. The majority of Kansas City's Mexican Americans, being American born, are not fully bilingual. Some narrative traditions, notably belief legends, have nevertheless rooted and flourished in the community. One example is the legend of *La Llorona*, the Weeping Woman.<sup>16</sup> John Fierro mentioned this eerie figure briefly in our interview at the Guadalupe Center:

"As a matter of fact, there's a story about La Llorona in this park [across the street from the

Guadalupe Center], Gage Park. They talk about a lady who is half horse, half woman. And she would just appear in the night and would call on you and come in different forms. Half horse, and other times part snake. And if you've been up there at night, it's always been a dark park, so you could believe it sometimes."<sup>17</sup>

Any survey of Kansas City's Mexican traditional arts would be remiss not to mention the traditional foods sold at a wonderful array of restaurants and bakeries, ranging from tiny *taquerias* or taco stands to elegant dining places. Menus feature a wide range of foods not always found in more standard, "generic" Mexican restaurants, including such delicacies as *nopalitos* (fried bits of the *nopal* cactus), *chicharrones con chile* (fried pork skin with chile), and *empanadas* (apple or pineapple turnovers). For sale next to the cash register one might find religious candles and copies of "Dos Mundos," a bilingual newspaper printed in Kansas City.

A third type of folk art, often referred to

as *barrio arts*, is produced by the younger generation. These arts have developed in Mexican American communities across the United States. The term *barrio*, meaning "neighborhood," is used to refer to Latino urban enclaves in the United States. *Barrio arts* include a unique visual arts tradition expressed in drawings, tattoos, and murals painted on walls, buildings, and cars. Descended from an older tradition of storefront murals depicting Mexican landscapes, courting couples, bullfights, and other romantic scenes, Chicano street murals are distinguished by an impressive array of cultural and religious symbols. Primary among these images are Pre-Colombian designs; popular saints such as the Virgin of Guadalupe and Christ (usually depicted as suffering); portraits of Mexican Revolutionary heroes; the Mexican flag; and the *cholo*, a modern Chicano anti-hero often depicted with a drooping mustache, sunglasses and hat. While this visual tradition has obviously been influenced by American mass produced popular art such as comic book illustrations, it has a highly expressive and arresting style and symbolic repertoire uniquely its own. Apart from art classes in high school, the artists producing these murals generally have no formal training, learning both imagery and technique primarily from each other.

The Guadalupe Center sponsors both mural projects and drawing classes, tapping on some of the local talent. One of their projects resulted in a striking mural painted on the walls surrounding steps leading up to Gage Park, across the street from the Center. Cris Medina describes the goal behind the mural projects:

"We've been doing mural projects oh, I'd say, a good eight years. It started to promote a little bit about the culture. It also acts as a deterrent for graffiti, a lot of which was gang related. It has been very successful. We've got some very beautiful murals. And kids respect it. Once we do the mural, they really don't go back over and write on it. This one (at Gage Park) was done in '91. We said, 'Hey, let's



"La Popular" Bakery in Kansas City's West Side.

make this look better" to the gang kids that were hanging out there. We asked them to draw it. There was one kid that was really talented. We got him a little money to paint while he was doing the project."<sup>18</sup>

John Fierro, the Director of Community Affairs for the Center, describes how the principal artist elicited the involvement of others in the project:

"I worked with the young man who did the murals across the street, Juan Moya. He is a very talented young man...he's about eighteen now. And you would be surprised. When he goes to do one, he'll have about four or five guys with him. 'You do this, you do that,' and they do it."<sup>19</sup>

Another primary example of *barrio arts* is the customized low rider car. Apart from its specialized hydraulics, the low rider car is characteristically ornate both inside and out. Interiors feature cut mirror decor, chandeliers, and velvet or satin covered seats. Ms. Ysaac jokes that her mother won't sit inside of one of these cars, as it reminds her of a coffin. Exteriors have elaborate "pin-striping" or murals depicting the same sorts of imagery described above for the street murals. Ms. Ysaac describes the work of Blas Ledezma, her godfather:

"My godfather does interiors of cars. Oh, my goodness! He does some hydraulics, he exchanges car body parts -- like putting on fenders from another car -- and he's done his

own paint work and pinstriping. But he's known for his interiors. The time that he puts in! And he cuts the glass and he's got the little champagne buckets and the bucket seats with the mirror around the back, and the mirror on the ceiling of the car, and mirror in the champagne bucket alcove."<sup>20</sup>

This brief and by no means complete survey of Mexican American folk arts and folklife in Kansas City points to a complex array of forms, influences, and expressions that, while constantly changing, yet retain a strong link to earlier Mexican traditions. Reflecting pride in ethnic roots, family and community, and a vibrant, creative impulse, these traditions enrich the cultural life of Kansas City, providing a rich source for developing young artists to draw upon.

### PART THREE

## Beto López and Mariachi México: A Look at One Kansas City Mariachi Band

### The History of Mariachi Music

The mariachi ensemble originated in the state of Jalisco in western Mexico. Its roots go back to the pre-Colombian era, and some postulate that the word *mariachi* comes from a Coca word (a now nearly extinct Mexican Indian language) mean-

ing a wooden platform on which dancers and musicians performed.<sup>21</sup> Following the Conquest, Pre-Colombian music and dance ensembles incorporated Spanish and African instrumentation and musical ideas. In her study on mariachi music, ethnomusicologist Patricia Harpole writes:

“By 1775, a new style of music had formed as a result of the combination of these three traditions [Indian, European and African]. The music was called *mestizo* or mixed music. The instruments most commonly used to perform *mestizo* music consisted of a harp, one or two violins, the *vihuela* or other form of guitar, and voices. During the 1800s in the villages and towns to the west of Guadalajara, this group became known as *mariachi*.”<sup>22</sup>

A more commonly voiced etymology for the word mariachi is that it comes from the French word *mariage*, as traditional Mexican music ensembles of Jalisco reportedly entertained at French weddings during the reign of Emperor Maximilian.

Prior to the 1930s, a typical mariachi ensemble consisted of *vihuela* (a round backed, five string, small guitar that was invented in Jalisco), *guitarra de golpe* (a flat backed, larger five string guitar), *arpa grande* (a large harp, similar to the ones

still used in Veracruz), violins, and of course, vocals. In the 1930s mariachi bands were, for the first time, broadcast over the radio. One of the prominent groups of the time, Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, is credited with introducing the *guitarrón* (replacing the large harp), two trumpets, and extra guitars to the mariachi ensemble, in order to produce a richer sound for the radio. The huge bass guitar or *guitarrón* is an instrument which, like the *vihuela*, also originated in Jalisco. Trumpets were not such an alien introduction, as they are commonly played at Mexican bullfights. According to Beto López:

“La familia Vargas originó el estilo y el número y tipo de instrumentos que usan hoy. Usaron guitarra, violín, vihuela, guitarrón — después añadieron otra guitarra. Luego el dueño de una estación de radio sugirió que usaran trompeta. Después de eso, la familia Vargas empezó a usar trompeta y hoy todos los mariachis usan trompeta. Por el radio empezaron a ser famosos. La música que cantaba la familia Vargas ahora se considera la música más tradicional de mariachi.”<sup>23</sup>

[The Vargas Family originated the style, number and type of instruments that are used today.

They used guitar, violin, vihuela, and guitarrón — later they added another guitar. Then the owner of a radio station suggested that they use trumpet. After that, the Vargas family started to use trumpet and today all mariachi bands use trumpet. They became famous through the radio. The music that the Vargas family sang is considered today to be the most traditional mariachi music.]

Because of its rising popularity promoted by the Mexican mass media, mariachi music — which is, in reality, only one regional Mexican style among many — came to be considered the quintessential Mexican folk musical expression, both nationally and internationally. While mariachi bands are still most common in Jalisco, they can now be found in virtually all parts of the Republic, throughout the American Southwest and in areas of Mexican population in the U.S. such as Chicago and Kansas City.

## Style, Instrumentation and Repertoire

The interplay of the instruments in a mariachi produces a characteristic sound and style. The first violin plays the melody, which is harmonized in thirds or sixths by the second violin. The trumpets follow suit, one playing melody and the other harmonizing in thirds, and in fact the voices do the same: a lead voice takes the melody line while the second and third voices harmonize. The violins, trumpets, and voice melody lines alternate, usually only playing together at the finale.

The *vihuela* and guitars provide chords and a strong rhythmic strum supporting the melody line. A counter rhythm is played by the *guitarrón* or bass guitar, whose strings, plucked in pairs, sound in octaves. The resulting sound is a rich, complex mixture of strong harmonies, chords, and complex rhythms.<sup>24</sup>

The most traditional or characteristic type of mariachi tune is the *son jalisciense*, which accompanies a type of Jaliscan folk dance still frequently performed by *baile*



Detail of Gage Park Mural by Juan Moya and assistants, 1991.

Pictured from left to right: the words “side” (from “Westside”) and “La Raza,” a portrait of a *cholo* and *chola*, a portrait of a woman from the Mexican Revolution carrying a Mexican flag, her hat reading “Brown and Proud.”





"Mariachi Mexico" guitarrón player and singer Juan Tórrez, playing at the Missouri Heritage fair in St. Louis. The guitarrón is an instrument that was developed in Jalisco. The style of hat and suit that mariachi musicians wear are adapted from the clothing traditionally worn by *charros* or cowboys from Jalisco.

*folklórico* ensembles. (Like much folk music, the mariachi functioned primarily, in the beginning, as a dance band). Beto López describes the rhythm of the *son jalisciense* as being basically a fast huapango, another type of song from this region that can be played at varying speeds. *Sones* continue to be among the most popular numbers in a mariachi's repertoire, as their exciting, complex rhythms punctuated by gritos (stylized yells), and often humorous lyrics, are definite crowd pleasers. I noticed that "Mariachi México," for example, generally includes a large number of *sones* such as "Jalisco," "Guadalajara," "El Carretero" or "La Negra" in their performances. The following verse and chorus are from "Jalisco," to give an example of the lyrics from a well known *son*:

En Jalisco se quiere a la buena,  
¡Porque es peligroso querer a la mala!  
Mujeres bonitas, rechulas de cara  
Así son las hembras de Guadalajara.

Ay, Jalisco, ¡no te rajes!  
¡Me sale del alma gritar con valor!  
Abrir todo el pecho pa' echar este grito,  
Que lindo es Jalisco, ¡palabra de honor!

(In Jalisco, everyone loves good  
Because it's dangerous to love evil!  
Pretty women with beautiful faces  
That's how the females of Guadalajara are.

Oh, Jalisco, don't back down!  
This valorous cry comes from my soul!  
I open my whole chest to let out this yell,  
How lovely is Jalisco, on my word of honor!)<sup>25</sup>

Other types of instrumentals and songs played by mariachi ensembles include *pasodobles* (instrumentals associated with bull fights), the aforementioned *huapangos*, *rancheras* (literally "country songs" originating in the northern states and borderlands), *jotas* (accompaniment for a folk dance of the same name), *polkas* (borrowed from the German settlers in Texas and Northern Mexico), and slow, romantic songs called *boleros*. According to Harpole:

"Today, a professional mariachi may know a thousand pieces by memory in order to fulfill all the requests made by listeners. The musicians must develop excellent memories since they play without written music".<sup>26</sup>

In addition to their standard repertoire, mariachis pride themselves on their versatility and ability to back up any singer on any kind of song -- ranging from "Happy Birthday" to opera. Beto López recalls a time when Mariachi México backed up *corrido* singers from Durango:

"Fuimos a Emporia, Kansas a tocar para puros nortños de Chihuahua -- todos andaban con sombrero. Pidieron puros corridos nortños, ¡y nosotros no sabemos corridos nortños! Entonces dijimos que nosotros tocaríamos si ellos cantarian. Que quedamos tocando cuatro, cinco horas, ¡y todavía querían más!"<sup>27</sup>

[We went to Emporia, Kansas to play for a crowd of northerners from Chihuahua -- they were all wearing hats. They requested only northern corridos, and we don't know any! So

we said that we'd play if they'd sing. We ended up playing for four, five hours and they still wanted more!]

## Social and Economic Context

Beto López recalls that there were five mariachi bands in his home town of La Barca, Jalisco, when he was growing up:

"Había cinco mariachis en mi pueblo. Tocaban en cantinas y en restaurantes durante la semana, luego para los fines de semana tocaban para fiestas privadas. Podían vivir bien como músicos porque en México se celebra de todo: hay fiesta cuando uno se nace, se casa y se muere, cuando uno se va o cuando regresa, para cumpleaños y día de santo; hay fiesta para todo. Los mariachis pueden ganar bastante dinero para vivir nada más tocando su música."<sup>28</sup>

[There were five mariachi bands in my town. They played in bars and restaurants during the week, then on the weekends for private parties. They could live well as musicians because in Mexico, everything is celebrated: there's a fiesta when one is born, marries or dies, when one leaves or returns, for birthdays and saints days; there's a fiesta for everything. Mariachi musicians can earn enough money to make a living.]

In the United States there are both professional, full time mariachis and those who have day jobs and play on evenings and weekends. Mariachi México falls into the latter category not through lack of opportunity. Mr. López believes that it would be quite possible for the band to make a living playing mariachi music in Kansas City because, as he says, "hay una necesidad aquí" [there's a need for it here.] However, the members of the group prefer to spend most evenings and weekends with their families, and the life of a full time musician precludes that. Nevertheless, Mariachi México finds itself playing nearly every weekend and sometimes during the week, for masses, weddings, anniversaries, birthday parties, street fairs, and cultural events such as the Cinco de Mayo. They also play at restaurants on occasion, but usually in the form of a trio -- trumpet and two



guitars -- rather than the entire group. The majority of these venues are in Kansas City and environs: the group primarily satisfies the demands of the local Mexican American community.

## "Mariachi México": History and Personnel

Beto López came to Kansas City in 1964 with his parents and siblings. His father first came to Kansas City in 1923 to work for the railroads and packing houses. He later returned to Mexico where he married and had children, eventually bringing them all back to Kansas City. Today the extended López family -- including parents, siblings, in-laws and cousins -- occupy five houses on one block in the Westside.

Mr. López comes from a long line of musicians, but none of them played mariachi. His grandfather played tuba, his father clarinet -- in fact, during his early sojourn in Kansas City, his father played with a dance band called the "Kansas City Mexican Band." Beto López played jazz, popular music, and even rock and roll before settling on mariachi. He recalls the first time someone asked him to play a mariachi song on the trumpet:

"Me invitó un grupo a tocar, y como yo nací en el estado de Jalisco, ya se supone que yo nací mariachi. El director del grupo me dice, "¡Toca una de mariachi!" Le dije, "Como cual, ¿la Negra? Sé cual es pero yo nunca la he tocado, no sé las partes, no sé como empiezo ni como acabar. Si le pongo atención al rato sí la puedo tocar," digo. "No es difícil pero yo no la sé." Y dijo, "¡Vienes de Jalisco y que que!"<sup>29</sup>

[A group invited me to play, and since I was born in the state of Jalisco, they supposed that I was born a mariachi. The director of the group says to me, "Play a mariachi number!" I said to him, "Which one, La Negra? I know which one it is but I've never played it, I don't know the parts, I don't know how it begins or ends. If I pay attention to it in a while I can play it," I said. "It's not hard, but I don't know it." And he said, "You come from Jalisco and ...!"<sup>29</sup>]



The first mariachi band Beto López played for was "Mariachi Tropical," shown here circa 1976. From left to right: Daniel Contreras, Beto López, Frank García, Luis Gómez, and Louis Lomelí.

Beto López's musical history points out how eclectic many Mexicans are in their musical tastes and backgrounds. As he says of himself, "A mí me gusta toda la música" (As for me, I like all music.) Folk, popular, and elite forms of music are often combined in the same individual and in the same ensemble. Although he had not played mariachi before, Mr. López, having grown up surrounded by it, undoubtedly had a strong passive knowledge of the form and repertoire. Once he decided, in 1976, to join a mariachi ensemble, he found he preferred it to his previous *orquesta* in which he had played a variety of American and Latin American popular music -- jazz, cha cha cha, mambos, cumbias, polkas, fox trots, blues, and rock and roll. As director of the *orquesta* he spent an inordinate amount of time arranging music and setting up sound systems. He explains:

"Me gusta más el mariachi, porque en el mariachi no tengo que escribir tanto, no tenemos que practicar tantas veces como en la orquesta, no tenemos que cargar tanto para el sonido. Y a mí toda mi vida he gustado

cantar, pero no soy un cantante. Y en el mariachi tengo la oportunidad de cantar, armonizando."<sup>30</sup>

[I like the mariachi better, because in the mariachi I don't have to write and arrange so much, we don't have to practice so often as in the orchestra, we don't have to carry so much sound equipment. And all my life I've liked to sing, but I'm not a singer. And in the mariachi I have the opportunity to sing harmony.]

Beto López began playing trumpet for a Kansas City group called "Mariachi Tropical" in 1976, and for other local groups such as "Eduardo y los Trovadores" on occasion. In 1979, a number of the musicians from "Mariachi Tropical" split to form a new group called "Mariachi México," which has not varied in personnel since that time. The seven members of "Mariachi México" are (and have been for fourteen years): Beto López and Luis Gómez on trumpets; Juan Tórrez on guitarrón and lead vocals; Steve and Debbie Wasko on violins; Louis Lomelí on guitar; and Jorge Vásquez on vihuela and guitar.

The backgrounds of these musicians

are quite varied. Luis Gómez was born in Emporia, Kansas, and studied music in the conservatory in Kansas and Missouri. Juan Tórrez from Durango, Mexico, is, in the opinion of Mr. López, a great talent in spite of the fact that he has had no formal training and does not read music. In addition to having the best voice of the group and playing the guitarrón, he also plays violin, guitar, saxophone, organ, and bajo sexto. Mr. Tórrez, who learned to play entirely by ear from his father, teaches chords and many of the tunes to the others. Jorge Vásquez, the vihuela player, is from Donna, Texas, and also has a fine singing voice. The guitarist player, Louis Lomeli, and the two violinists are from Kansas City, Missouri. Steve Wasko is Mexican on his mother's side, Polish on his father's; he and his wife, Debbie, also play in a symphony orchestra. They find mariachi to be equally, if not more, challenging, as classical music, for in mariachi they must learn and play by ear, memorize tunes, and pick up new ones on the spot in performance.

"Mariachi México" is in frequent demand in the greater Kansas City area, in part because, as Mr. López asserts, they are the only local mariachi with complete instrumentation:

"Hay muchos grupitos que caminan las mesas, grupos de estilo romántico, pero ninguno está completo. A unos no tienen trompeta, a otros no violines. Violines no tiene ningún grupo nada más nosotros."<sup>31</sup> [There are many little groups that stroll by the tables, romantic style groups, but none of them is complete. Some don't have trumpets, some don't have violins. None of the groups have violins but us.]

Apart from his role as the director of "Mariachi México," Beto López is also an active community leader in his church and parish. He organized and participated in an enactment of "Las Posadas" in December, 1992, which involved the majority of his brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, and cousins living nearby. This traditional Mexican Christmas observance entails a dramatization of Mary and



Beto López and his apprentice, Antonio Sierra, Jr., during a lesson at Mr. López' home in the West side.

Joseph's search for shelter in Bethlehem. On nine consecutive evenings leading up to Christmas, a group of singers, musicians and community members walk to various destinations in the neighborhood, serenading their neighbors with a rendition of "Las Posadas" ("The Inns.") The evening culminates with the group being invited in for refreshments at a final destination. Mr. López describes this activity:

Mi familia por aquí -- en la esquina viven mis papas, y mis cuñados, tenemos cinco casas en esta cuadra -- las nueve noches los hicimos. Mi mama, mis hermanos, padrecito, y estaba fri-ito. Pero íbamos a casas y al restaurante de María [Chaurand, the director of the *Grupo Atotonilco Baile Folklórico*] en la veinticuatro, se llama "El Taquito." Y llegamos allá."<sup>32</sup>

"[My family around here -- my parents live on the corner, and my brothers-in-law, we have five houses in all on this block -- we did it for the whole nine days. My mother, my brothers, papa, and it was cold! But we went to the houses and to Maria's restaurant over on 24th, it's called "El Taquito." And we made it over there.]

## Passing It On

In spite of the popularity of mariachi music in the area, there are apparently few young people actively learning it. Ninth grader Antonio Sierra, Jr., is an exception. The son of a talented guitarist, Antonio has been playing trumpet in a Latino popular music band called "Espejismo" ("Mirage") for the past two years. On the occasions when his band was hired to play at the same events as "Mariachi México," Antonio recalls observing Beto López with admiration:

"At *quinceañeras* when my band used to play, I used to always watch him, because he was mariachi, you know. They would play at receptions and all that. So I was on top of the stage with the instruments, but while I was putting them away I was just looking at him play the trumpet. I said, "God, I like the way he plays the trumpet, beautiful, you know." And I just never wanted to ask him, "Could you teach me?", you know, because I was embarrassed."<sup>33</sup>

Beto López learned of Antonio's desire to learn mariachi trumpet around the same time he heard about the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. The two began working together in Septem-

ber, 1992, with weekly lessons. Antonio has accompanied Mr. López at a performance in Jefferson City and is in the process of mastering a repertoire of about fifteen songs. Already leaning in the direction of preferring mariachi to the electric band he currently plays in, Antonio comments:

"I like it more. The band I'm in now, I have to carry speakers, a lot of equipment, a whole bunch of speakers, lights. And for mariachi, you know, we just carry our instruments -- trumpets and guitars. We don't have to be hooking up wires all the time. But that don't really matter. I just like the music mariachi. I like to sing some of the songs, too."<sup>34</sup>

## PART FOUR

### Conclusion

As this brief glimpse into the story of one mariachi band suggests, the maintenance of ethnic identity often entails making a personal choice to retain, develop and pass on folk and ethnic arts. While both Beto López and his apprentice highlighted practical reasons -- such as the avoidance of cumbersome sound equipment -- as a primary reason for preferring mariachi to other, less traditional, musical forms, there are obviously other equally compelling reasons for becoming a tradition bearer of this quinessentially Mexican music. Perhaps the most persuasive of these reasons is, as Mr. López has observed, that there is a perceived demand for this kind of music in the Mexican American community itself: "Hay una necesidad." By choosing to become a mariachi musician -- a choice that he made over other styles of music at which he is equally adept -- Mr. López is satisfying a personal as well as a community need.

The role of mariachi music in furthering a sense of ethnic identity and pride for Mexicans and Mexican Americans living in the United States is indirectly touched on in Mr. López' comments on the per-

ceived status of the mariachi musician in the two countries. He notes:

"En México, ser mariachi no sirve para nada. Allá la discriminación es social, aquí es más racial. Por ejemplo, en México hay el concepto que la música mariachi es música de los pobres, los humildes, algo menor o bajo. De todos modos, la música mariachi es muy popular con la mayoría de la gente. Pero aquí en los Estados Unidos la cosa es diferente. Ahora todo ha cambiado, no tenemos prejuicio contra la música mariachi. La hija de Louis Lomelí cree que es algo orgulloso ser hija de mariachi. Cuando se fué a México, dijo a la gente que "¡Mi papá es mariachi!"<sup>35</sup>

[In Mexico, to be a mariachi musician doesn't get you anywhere. There discrimination is social; here, it's more racial. For example, in Mexico there's the idea that mariachi music is music of the poor, the humble people, something lesser or lower. On the other hand, mariachi music is very popular with the majority of the people. But here in the United States, it's a different story. Now everything has changed, we don't have any prejudice against mariachi music. Louis Lomeli's daughter believes that being the daughter of a mariachi musician is something to be proud of. When she went to Mexico, she said to everyone, "My papa is a mariachi!"]

If being a mariachi does, indeed, have a higher status in Mexican American communities in the United States, what could be the reason? Perhaps the difference lies in the fact that mariachi music functions in the United States as a symbolic marker of ethnic identity. As Cris Medina said, "I feel sorry for some of those people who can't go back and identify their roots and aren't sure where they come from or who they are." The association of mariachi with "lower class" in Mexico is eclipsed in this country by its symbolic role in the on-going maintenance and re-creation of Mexican American cultural heritage, identity and unity -- all of which provide a positive alternative to assimilation.

Of course, social discrimination exists in the United States along with racial discrimination -- the two are often intertwined. Members of the same ethnic

group may feel a closer bond in this country despite original differences of class or social status, in part because they face similar discrimination from the dominant culture whether they are dentists or construction workers. The value of cultural symbols and ethnic display becomes particularly marked in such a situation. This may be, in part, what Beto López was getting at when, in response to a question I asked about their outfits, he joked, "Si quieren que nosotros llevemos sombrero, ¡cobramos más!" (If they want us to wear the hats, we charge more!)



"Mariachi México" trumpet players Luis Gómez and Beto López -- with their hats on -- playing at the Missouri Heritage Fair.

Photograph by David Whitman, 1993

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Lonn Taylor and Dessa Bokides, *New Mexican Furniture 1600-1940* (Santa Fe: The Museum of New Mexico Press, 1987), p. 119.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>3</sup>Cary McWilliams, *North from Mexico: the Spanish-Speaking People of the United States* (New York: Greenwood Publishers, 1968), p. 165

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 115; and Cristobal Medina, taped interview with Dana Everts-Boehm at the Guadalupe Center, Kansas City, February 23, 1993. During the interview, Mr. Medina referred to the same origin of the term "greaser" as appeared in McWilliam's book.

<sup>5</sup>Barry Bergery, "City Sounds: Urban Music of Kansas City and St. Louis" (Program Notes from "City Sounds/Rural Rhythms," a series produced by the Cultural Heritage Center, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1984), p. 6.

<sup>6</sup>Medina, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup>Bergey, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>8</sup>Alicia López and John Fierro, *Hispanic Profile: Kansas City Metropolitan Statistical Area Policy Analysis Project* (Kansas City, Missouri: Guadalupe Center, 1992), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup>Medina, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup>See Américo Paredes, *Folktales of Mexico* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. xvi-xxxi, for a synopsis of folklore concerning the Virgin of Guadalupe.

<sup>11</sup>Medina, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup>Bergey, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>13</sup>Medina, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup>*Quinceañeras* are very elaborate rites of passages for Mexican and Mexican American girls who reach their fifteenth birthdays, ushering them into womanhood. The tradition is widespread throughout Mexico, the American Southwest, and pockets of Mexican American population everywhere. The pomp of a quinceañera can approach that of a wedding, with many guests, a rented hall, one to two live bands, and dinner for all the guests. The birthday girl herself, also called a quinceañera, generally wears a floor length formal (as do her attendants, who can number up into the teens). She and her attendants are accompanied by young men as their chaperones, dressed in tuxedos.

<sup>15</sup>Cecilia Ysaac, taped interview with Dana Everts-Boehm at the Guadalupe Center, Kansas City, February 23, 1993.

<sup>16</sup>Paredes, op. cit., p. xvi.

<sup>17</sup>John Fierro, taped interview with Dana Everts-Boehm at the Guadalupe Center, Kansas City, February 23, 1993.

<sup>18</sup>Medina, op. cit.

<sup>19</sup>Fierro, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup>Ysaac, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup>*Raíces Musicales* (Program booklet for tour of same name, Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Traditional Arts, 1981).

<sup>22</sup>Patricia W. Harpole and Mark Fogelquist, "Los Mariachis! An Introduction to Mexican Mariachi Music" (Danbury, Connecticut: World Music Press, 1989), p. 7.

<sup>23</sup>Heriberto López Sr., taped interview with Dana Everts-Boehm in his home in Kansas City, Missouri, February 23, 1993. The interview was conducted in Spanish. The English translation following the quote is by the interviewer.

<sup>24</sup>Harpole and Fogelquist, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>25</sup>These lyrics are from a taped performance of "Jalisco" by "Mariachi México" in Jefferson City on April 6, 199, were transcribed and translated by Dana Everts-Boehm.

<sup>26</sup>Harpole and Fogelquist, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>27</sup>Heriberto López, op. cit.

<sup>28</sup>Heriberto López, op. cit.

<sup>29</sup>Heriberto López, interviewed on tape at his home in Kansas City on January 11, 1993, by Dana Everts-Boehm.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Antonio Sierra, interviewed on tape at the home of Beto López on January 11, 1993, by Dana Everts-Boehm.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Heriberto López, taped interview on February 23, 1993, op. cit.

MISSOURI  
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THEIR TRADITIONAL ARTS

"The Masters and Their Traditional Arts" is a series of brochures written by experts in Missouri's folk arts in association with Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. This brochure was written by Dana Everts-Boehm, with editing assistance from Morteza Sajadian. It is based on a design by Spencer Galloway for the series.

### The Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program

Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program was initiated in 1984 with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts Folk Arts Program and the Missouri Arts Council, and run through the Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Missouri. With the closing of the Cultural Heritage Center in 1993, the Apprenticeship Program has found a new home with the Missouri Folk Arts Program, which is under the auspices of the Museum of Art and Archaeology at MU.

The object of the Apprenticeship Program is to locate the state's most active and talented tradition bearers and encourage them to pass their skills on to aspiring apprentices. To date, the program has funded a total of 81 masters to teach 194 apprentices. The cultural and regional heritage of the state is thus recognized, honored and conserved for future generations.

Master folk artists generally learn their skills informally, through observation or imitation, rather than from books or institutional training. Their apprentices are most often members of the same ethnic, regional, occupational or religious community as the master. The art that they learn -- whether it be quilting, john boat construction, square dance fiddling, gospel singing, mariachi music, Lao weaving, or blues guitar -- is deeply embedded in its community's history and daily life. By making the choice to become tradition bearers, master folk artists and their apprentices assume responsibility for conserving and expressing their group's cultural heritage.

Program staff conducts fieldwork to find potential master artists throughout the state, documenting their arts with camera and tape recorder, and encouraging them to find apprentices and apply to the program. Once the year's batch of applications are in, a panel of experts reviews them and selects the most promising. Priority is given to apprentices and masters who share the same cultural heritage as the art form; and priority is also given to living art forms with few living practitioners in the master/apprentice's community.

Once they have been selected, teams of master and apprentice work closely together for the period of nine to ten months, during which they accomplish a specific goal. Apprentices often continue to consult the masters long after the program has "officially" ended. The Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program thus functions to promote cultural conservation of the state's folk arts and folklife.

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