

“A Handful of Dinky:”

African American Storytelling in Missouri

Featuring Master Storyteller Gladys A. Coggsell

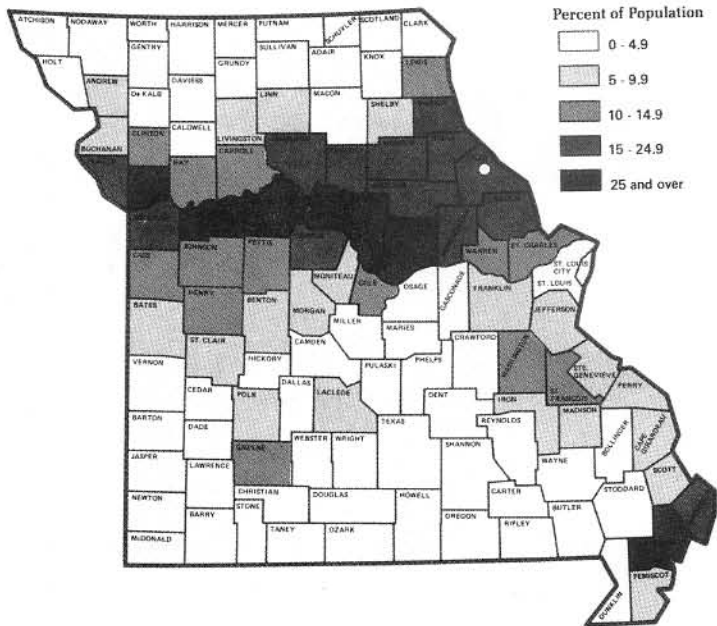
by Dana Everts-Boehm
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Gladys Coggsell tells stories to a teenage audience in Jefferson City, April, 1992.

Missouri

THE **MASTERS**
& their traditional arts



Percentage of slaves by County, 1860. Reproduced from Greene, Kremer and Holland, *Missouri's Black Heritage*, 22. White dot indicates approximate location of "Little Africa" near Louisiana, Missouri in Pike County.

African Americans first came to what is now Missouri in 1720, when Haitian slaves were brought by French settlers to work in the Ste. Genevieve District lead mines (Greene 1980:9). After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Missouri attracted great numbers of Anglo-Americans, many of whom brought black slaves with them. Missouri became a state in 1820, and by 1860, the census counted 115,000 African American slaves and 3,572 freedmen. Most of the black population was concentrated in the fertile agricultural lands of the Mississippi and Missouri River Valleys (Greene 1980:23).

These black Missourians brought a rich cultural heritage with them, a syncretism of African, Caribbean, Native American, and European elements which helped them survive under the most inhuman circumstances. Foremost among their cultural arts was the art of storytelling, rooted in the *griot* tradition of West Africa. Traditionally accorded great respect and prestige, African griots are trained in music, poetry, genealogy, tribal history, and folk narrative. Generally passed down from father to son, the griot's trade requires an acute memory. While the tradition is fading in West Africa, it persists in many areas, especially Ghana and Gambia (Holt 1989:180; Holland 1992).

In addition to the major African functions of chronicling the history of the tribe and imparting cultural values, storytelling in the developing New World slave culture took on several new roles. It became a crucial tool in promoting survival skills, bolstering self-esteem, fostering community solidarity, and providing an expressive outlet for criticizing what the slaves could not openly criticize in front of the masters.

Storytelling continues to occupy an important place in contemporary African American culture. Typically encountering

a lack of written records and a paucity of black history books in the schools, African Americans have had to rely largely on their shared oral traditions to reconstruct their cultural past.

A variety of narrative genres is passed down from generation to generation in many black families. These story types include folktales, such as animal tales featuring "trickster" heroes; religious, historical, supernatural, and aetiological legends; tall tales; genealogies; family sagas in the form of personal experience stories and memorates; and Biblical stories retold in oral sermons. Many of the folktales recorded in the United States have analogs in Africa — Br'er Rabbit being a famous example (Herskovits 1941). Much of the other narrative material reflects African American experience while it exhibits a heritage of African stylistic traits (Abrahams 1985). Storytelling remains a primary means of recording black history and promoting community values.

One of the foremost traditional African American narrators in Missouri today is Gladys A. Coggsell, a master storyteller in the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. Born and reared in New Jersey, Ms. Coggsell and her family moved to Missouri in 1974 and settled in Frankford, Pike County, in 1982. A self-described "twentieth century griot," Ms. Coggsell inherited the role of family historian and teller of tales from her great-grandparents. Since moving to Missouri, she has collected oral histories and narratives from the black communities of Frankford, Hannibal, and St. Louis, and has added these accounts to her repertoire.

Ms. Coggsell's repertoire is remarkable for its breadth and diversity. Most of the aforementioned genres considered to be characteristic of African American oral narrative can be found among her stories. The subject matter also reflects traditional African American topics such as talking animals, ghosts, voodoo beliefs, remarkable local characters, and family sagas focusing on heroic individuals (Dorson 1956, 1958; Holt 1989:164).

A naturally inquisitive child, Ms. Coggsell began learning to be a "twentieth century griot" while growing up in her great-grandmother's boarding house in urban Paterson, New Jersey. She recalls that "We were not really allowed to listen to grownups' conversations and so a lot of the things I heard were because I was just very nosy and sneaky." Blessed with a fertile storytelling environment as a child, young Gladys was frequently held spellbound by such narrators as her great-grandmother, her great-grandfather, and various boarders including "Papa Nash" the conjurer, and "Uncle Buddy" the town mourner. What they didn't tell her, she "overheard."

Great-grandmother Marie Wallace Cofer recounted family history going back six generations. A native of Virginia, Marie Cofer exemplifies the "older relative" in many black families who is a "greater reservoir of historical information, particularly community and family history, than history books or public documents" (Holt 1989:164). Many of Mrs. Cofer's narratives revolve around *her* grandmother, Mammy Kay, who was born into slavery. The "Mammy Kay" stories reflect what folklorist Gladys-Marie Fry has identified as a characteristic trait of black family sagas. Fry writes that "As a rule, in black families, the life of a particular relative may be remembered in detail. This figure



Photo courtesy Gladys Coggswell

The Coggswell sisters, Gladys on the right and Claudia, in Paterson, New Jersey.

becomes the focal point for all the traditions remembered about a particular era" (Fry 1975:8).

Mammy Kay's mother and aunt were captured by slave traders in Africa. While standing on the slave ship, Mammy Kay's mother witnessed her sister jump overboard into the sea and drown rather than be enslaved. Taken to a plantation in Virginia, her African mother was sold when Mammy Kay was still a child. Yet even after her father ran away to find her mother, Mammy Kay did not lose heart. Great-grandmother Marie used to say that "In her heart Mammy Kay never was a slave, because she was too ornery." Ms. Coggswell illustrates her ancestor's indomitable spirit in this account told to an adult audience on March 9, 1992 at Stephens College in Columbia:

When I was a little girl, my great-grandmother told me stories about her grandmother, who died at the age of one hundred and two in 1939. I guess one of the reasons I remember this story so well is because we are all fat in our family. All the women are fat: my mother is fat, my grandmother is fat, and my great-grandmother was fat. My great-grandmother used to always tell us, "Now don't worry 'bout that none 'cause that's the way you all supposed to be." And the reason we were supposed to be fat was because her grandmother, who she referred to as Mammy

Kay, "Mammy Kay, she almost lost her life for a biscuit!"

It seems that Mammy Kay had gone into the kitchen because she was working in the house. The owners had put her in the house after her mother and father had left. Some of the other kids were able to get extra things to eat because they had some of them a mother and father who could bring them extras. But Mammy Kay didn't have anyone now and she couldn't get any extras. So when she was in the kitchen she saw a biscuit and she knew she wasn't supposed to have this biscuit, but she was hungry. And that biscuit was a luxury then, a gourmet item to say the least.

Well, Mammy Kay ate the biscuit and the mistress came in the kitchen and "whacked her upside the head," my great-grandmother said. "See, now, Mammy Kay was just like the rest of us, she had a *temper*, had a *bad temper*. See, she started a fightin' with the mistress. You know, in those days, you wasn't supposed to fight with no white woman, no white man, *nothin'* white, so Mammy Kay had to get outta there. And she ran."

Like many escaped slaves (Blassingame 1979:211), Mammy Kay found refuge with a Native American community, where she raised three children and learned the art of trapping. She earned money for her family by selling the skins of animals she had trapped to buy calico cloth, from which she made dresses for sale. She and one of her daughters were later kidnapped and sold back into slavery before Emancipation in 1863 finally freed them.

Mammy Kay raised her granddaughter, Marie Cofer, and told her other stories about slavery. The following example falls into the category of conjure legend, illustrating the belief in African traditional religion that continued to be prevalent during slavery in spite of Christianization, and continues today in many parts of the United States under such terms as "voodoo," "hoodoo," and "conjure." Ms. Coggswell recounted this during our first interview:

Coggswell: There was a woman who came from Africa and was on the plantation. The slave master had hired an overseer to make sure everybody did their work. And this woman could go through the cotton fields and pick about ten times as much cotton as everyone else, and no one could understand why she was so strong and fast. Then one day the overseer wanted to have something done that the men did, and she did it instead. Then they wanted her to do more. And she put her hands on her hips and said, in her broken dialect, that she wasn't going to do any more. The overseer started to whip her. And the whip wound around her, but he couldn't get it back off. After that he did not bother her and he became very sick. This is supposed to be a true story.

Everts-Boehm: And they never found out what kinds of things she was doing to cause that?

Coggswell: No, but she always used to hum and chant and knew all about herbs. Some said that she was the daughter of a witch doctor and others that she was a voodoo woman.

The belief that a conjurer could prevent floggings was apparently quite prevalent, as it is referred to in numerous sources (Blassingame 1979:109; Brown 1880:12; and

Douglass 1855:80).

Ms. Coggswell found another rich source of oral narrative in her great-grandfather, Pete Cofer. A Missourian of Native American and African American descent, he was Marie's second husband. Like all the children in her neighborhood, Ms. Coggswell called him "Uncle Pete." She recalls, "I was in my early teens before I knew that Uncle Pete was my great-grandfather. My great-grandmother had put him out because he was a drunk and my great-grandmother was very religious. I had a friend, Lenora Grey, and she loved Uncle Pete. He was a boarder in her house. So when I'd go visit her, Uncle Pete would tell us stories."

The stories Uncle Pete told were fanciful narratives such as tall tales, animal tales, and explanatory legends. "Uncle Pete was the one who used to talk about Missouri," Ms. Coggswell remembers. "According to him, he could communicate with animals. And every animal or insect or bird he ever came into contact with had special powers. He swore that every animal was to be respected and loved, and if you bothered them, they were going to retaliate in some way." The following story is an aetiological legend, a narrative which purports to explain the origin of natural phenomena — in this case, the waxing and waning of the moon. This story was told to an audience of third and seventh graders in Jefferson City on April 28, 1992:

We had another person in our family who used to give us lessons, Uncle Pete. Now, Uncle Pete told us a lot of stories. And some of them were true, I'm sure. But some of them were so outlandish that I just have to wonder. Uncle Pete swore to us that if we didn't fight that we would be okay. But if we fought other children and made trouble with other people, that we were gonna be just like the moon.

Now Uncle Pete swears that the sun and the moon used to live in the sky in the daytime together. But everyone praised the sun, told the sun how wonderful and bright it was, how the shine and the warmth were so welcome. Well, the moon got just a little bit jealous. So the moon decided that it would go around to the trees and it would go around to the plants and to the animals, and anyone else who would listen, and talk about the sun. And the moon tiptoed around, and told the trees: "Pssst, pssst, pssst, pssst." It was so bad, I can't repeat it.

Well, as gossip does, eventually this gossip got back to the sun. Well, the sun was *hot!* That's what Uncle Pete said. He said, "You know, that sun got *hot!*" (stamps foot). 'Cause Uncle Pete was very expressive when he told the story. He said, "And when the sun gets hot, honey, you better *watch out!* Watch out!"

Well, the sun had heard what the moon said. And the sun went over there (stomps across the floor swinging hips). You know by that walk that the sun was a woman. So the sun went over to the moon. (Raising voice). "Did you say psst psst psst psst psst?!" The moon said (dropping voice), "Oh, no! Oh, no!" So the sun said, "I better not find out that you did!" And the sun walked away again (stomps across floor swinging hips again).

And people started *praising* the sun. And this time the



Gladys Coggswell addresses the audience in Jefferson City, April, 1992.

Photo by Dana Everts-Boehm

moon said to herself, "I don't care if she *does* find out! I'm gonna go and talk some more! Pssst, pssst, pssst, pssst, and psssssst!" Really nasty stuff this time.

Well, I guess the moon expected this to happen. And whether the moon expected it or not, the gossip got back to the sun. And Uncle Pete said, "Ooooh, *this* time the sun was *really hot!* I mean *really hot!*" We were tempted to ask Uncle Pete if the sun had ever been cold, but we didn't do that. So this time the sun went over to the moon, no questions asked. Bam, bam, bam, bam! And beat up the moon really bad.

Well, the moon was so embarrassed, that the moon just slunk on out. And Uncle Pete said, "That moon just snuck away. Just snuck on outta there like a slinky skunk." So we said, "Well, Uncle Pete, what happened to the moon?"

Uncle Pete said, "Well, the moon was beat up so bad, and she was so embarrassed, that the first time it came back out, the first time it could ever show its face, it just snuck on in at night and showed about a quarter of its face. And a little while later, it snuck on in at night again, and showed about half of its face. And a little while later, the moon got brave and showed *all* its face. But chil'ren, you know to this day, the moon only shows its whole face once in a while. So don't you go gossipin' about nobody, or you won't be able to show your face all the time."

Ms. Coggswell's storytelling style incorporates the speech patterns, gestures, and dramatic movements she learned from her great-grandmother, Uncle Pete, and various boarders such as Uncle Buddy. She comments, "Some African Americans have a problem with using dialect. However, my great-grandmother, who was a very wise woman and who I am very proud of, spoke in dialect, and I am not ashamed of that. There's a feeling that comes over me [when I'm telling a story] and I can do it with such ease. I remember my great-grandmother's animations and how she'd throw up her hands. I remember Uncle Pete as if it were yesterday, just stamping that spider on the ground, so I incorporate all that into my storytelling." Her skillful use of dialect, gesture, movement, dance and song are not only true to her family roots, but also characteristic of traditional African American storytelling style in general. African and African American storytelling have been described thus: "Throughout West Africa, storytelling was an art form including acting, singing, and gestures" (Blassingame 1979:23-4), and "During the telling of a tale, slaves chanted, mimicked, acted and sang" (Holt 1989:193).

Ms. Coggswell tends to classify her family stories as lessons: "Another person in our family who used to give us *lessons* [was] Uncle Pete." The didactic function of African American storytelling is primary, according to narrative scholars and historians. Blassingame, for example, writes, "Folktales represented the distillation of folk wisdom and were used as an instructional device to teach young slaves how to survive." Ms. Coggswell collaborates this perspective in her statement, "The stories that my great-grandmother used to tell me were basically saying, nobody is going to give you anything. Life is hard. If you're a Negro, she'd say, you have to work twice as hard to get half of what everybody else gets. It was because of the stories that I had a more realistic view of what to expect from life. They have given me a sense of strength. I did not expect the world to make a soft bed for me."

The stories also convey cultural and moral values stressing the importance of community solidarity and respect for others. The story about the sun and the moon, for example, admonishes children not to gossip. During her performance in Jefferson City for young people, Ms. Coggswell introduced that story with a song that teaches the same lesson. In singing this song, she elicited audience participation by instructing the children to sing "No, no!" whenever she asked them a question.

Coggswell: Well, I met my sister the other day,
Gave her my right hand.
Just as soon as my back was turned,

She scandalized my name!
Now, do you call that a sister?

Children: No, no!
Coggswell: Do you call that a sister?
Children: No, no!
Coggswell: Do you call that a sister?
Children: No, no!
Coggswell: She scandalized my name!

And, (she continues), that is what Uncle Buddy would tell us when we would want to make fun of someone, or talk about someone. He'd say (slow, singsong voice), "Now, chil'ren, don't y'all go scandalizin' somebody's name. 'Cause it's wrong!" So we'd say, "Okay, Uncle Buddy!" Anytime Uncle Buddy'd say something, "Okay, Uncle Buddy!" So he wouldn't have to tell us any more, so we wouldn't have to hear that whiney talk.

Most of great-grandmother Marie's stories were pointedly didactic. Ms. Coggswell remarks, "If you did anything wrong, whether it was lie or if she thought you took something that didn't belong to you, she had a story for it. Because someone she knew had done the same bad thing and had come to a bad end. She wanted you to know what that bad end was, and of course it was always very horrifying, so you didn't do it."

When she moved to Missouri with her husband Truman and her son Truman Jr., Ms. Coggswell became more interested in reclaiming her family narratives. She observes, "Missouri has a cultural aura about it that made me want to know not only about my family but about other families, especially African American families, because there's hardly anything in the history books." After meeting some of the local raconteurs in her new home of Frankford, a small town just south of Hannibal, Ms. Coggswell realized with surprise that many of the traditions that she had assumed were unique to her family or to New Jersey — "asfidity bags" and voodoo beliefs, for example — were just as prevalent in rural Missouri (Kremer 1989-90:83; Hyatt 1970).

Ms. Coggswell was also strongly influenced by her husband, Truman, and his respect for his family heritage. The son of the last chief of the Schatighcoke tribe in Connecticut and a traditional raconteur in his own right, Truman inspired in Gladys a renewed appreciation for her legacy of oral literature. "The more Truman talked to me," Ms. Coggswell notes, "the more I would have these visions of my great-grandmother telling stories." Increasingly, Ms. Coggswell has sought opportunities to share her stories with the public, and to broaden her repertoire by collecting narratives from her neighbors in Frankford and Hannibal.

One of the matriarchs of Frankford's black community, Mrs. Camie Doolin, welcomed the Coggswells to town and proved to be a wonderful storyteller and a friend. From Mrs. Doolin, who recently died at age 99, Ms. Coggswell learned local oral traditions about "patterollers" (white patrollers during slavery), black midwives, clever mules, and African American schools. One of the stories Mrs. Doolin told was about a runaway slave who happened to be her grandfather. Ms. Coggswell told this story at the performance at Stephens College:



Photo courtesy Gladys Coggswell

Mrs. Camie Doolin (in front, on the right) and choir, standing in front of a church in Bowling Green, Missouri, June 21, 1953.

She talked about her grandfather, who she said knew that he had to have a pass to go from one place to another. And he didn't have a pass, and he couldn't read or write, but he could do something similar to letters. He thought, "Those patterollers ain't no more smarter than me." So he wrote something down which was not his name, not his pass, not his owner. He showed it to them and they let him pass, because they couldn't read either. She said, "He just walked right on to freedom and never stopped!"

Ms. Coggswell is also compiling accounts about a tract of land in nearby Louisiana, Missouri, referred to as "Little Africa." Her sources for oral history concerning Little Africa come from both local blacks and whites.

Local black residents including Mrs. Doolin, Mr. Leroy Berry, and Mrs. Vivian South recount that Little Africa once belonged to the largest slaveholder in the region, Malcolm Redding, owner of the Redding Brick Company. Much of Little Africa being wooded, it reputedly served as a hideout for runaway slaves before the Civil War. Thus, Little Africa had, according to black oral history, an African American

community comprised of runaway slaves before Emancipation.

Frankford resident Hardy Wilson, a white farmer, explains that Redding gave forty acres to each of his ex-slaves after Emancipation, with special consideration to his "favorite black grandson." Redding apparently followed the common practice of visiting the slave women's quarters (which according to Mr. Hardy were called "wench houses") at night, and some of his slaves were his own children. These forty acres being contiguous, they formed what came to be referred to by the whites as Little Africa, a post-Civil war rural black settlement (see Holt 1989: 198; Kremer 1989-90; and Sneed 1991 for descriptions of post Civil War black towns).

One of the stories remembered by both whites and blacks concerns a slave owned by Redding of unusually massive stature and build. Called "Zebediah" by blacks and "Big Bryant" by whites, this man purportedly had been assigned the task of carrying one of Redding's sons around on his back from place to place. The son, being very frail, was not allowed to ride horseback. The white versions of the story focus on how "valuable" the frail heir was; the black versions focus on how

immensely powerful and impressive Zebediah was. It was often the case that slaves, being renamed by new masters, would retain their original birthname by which they were known in the black community (Blassingame 1979:182-3). So this individual has been remembered by blacks as Zebediah and by whites as Big Bryant.

The black residents of Little Africa have all dispersed, the last family having left in the 1930s or 1940s. Ms. Cogswell has heard that many of the original owners, being non-literate ex-slaves, were cheated out of the land in various ways. The widespread loss of black-owned land due to failed government policy and unscrupulous local officials has been documented throughout the South following Reconstruction (DuBois 1903:24; Greene, Kremer and Holland 1980:77; Holt 1989:135; Logan 1965; Sloan 1989, Appendix IX:20-21). The mass exodus in the early twentieth century reflects a nationwide pattern of black migration from the rural South to the urban North. This massive migration was spurred by a number of factors including the demise of the sharecropping system, job opportunities in the cities, and the search for a better racial climate in the North (Holt 1989: 177).

One of the few indications that a black community once lived in Little Africa is an overgrown cemetery. Hardy Wilson

took Ms. Cogswell and me to visit this cemetery on January 21, 1992. Two of the few remaining tombstones read "Wm. Bell, CO. C., 68th U.S. C.I." (William Bell, Company C., 68th United States Colored Infantry) and "Bus't Carter, CO. B, 62nd U.S. C.," (Buster [?] Carter, Company B, 62nd United States Colored Infantry.) These men had belonged to two of the seven black regiments raised in Missouri that fought on the Union side in the Civil War.

By February, 1864, a total of 3,700 black recruits had enlisted in Missouri's Colored Infantry. 356 of these recruits were from Louisiana, where Little Africa is located. Encouraged by the promise of freedom offered in return for joining the army, blacks who wanted to enlist faced white opposition from slaveowners and their supporters, often expressed by violent physical intimidation. Once in the army, black soldiers were subjected to discrimination in the form of lesser pay, inadequate clothing, food and supplies, and instances of cruelty and even murder perpetrated by white Union soldiers. Yet "Missouri slaves like blacks in other states enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to join the [Union] army" (Greene 1980:66-7), as it was a sure road to freedom.

The 68th Regiment participated in the successful assault on Fort Blakely, Alabama, in April, 1865. The 62nd Regiment,



Hardy Wilson points out tract of land near Little Africa where Reddings' slave quarters used to stand. January, 1992.

the first regiment of Colored Infantry raised in Missouri, fought in the last battle of the war at White's Ranch in Texas. But the 62nd Regiment is perhaps best remembered for its contribution to the founding of the Lincoln Institute, which later became Lincoln University in Jefferson City. Many of the soldiers in the 62nd had learned to read and write while in the army, and wanted to continue to go to school after the war. They donated a significant portion of their salaries earned as soldiers — the lieutenants each giving \$50, officers of higher rank \$100, and enlisted men whatever they could afford — to start Lincoln Institute, originally conceived of as a training school for black teachers. The total donation was \$5,000.10, which initiated the founding of the Lincoln Institute (Greene 1980: 83).

The value placed on education by the black community in Missouri is a major theme in many of the personal experience stories and local legends that Ms. Coggswell has collected from Frankford and Hannibal residents. The following account, told to the young audiences in Jefferson City, illustrates this theme:

When we moved to Frankford, I met a very interesting woman. Her name was Mrs. Camie Doolin. And I think Mrs. Camie Doolin was every bit of two hundred years old.

And she had the most wonderful stories, but she was also very stern with everyone. And I remember her inviting us to her church. And we were a little bit late. And she said to us, "Now you all better try to start bein' on time, or you gonna find yourself holdin' a handful a' Dinky!"

Well, I didn't know what that meant. And I found it odd that she would say such a thing in church. And she noticed that I was looking at her a bit odd, so she said, "Oh, ho, ho, you don't know about the handful a' Dinky, do you?" And of course, I didn't.

So then she went on to explain to me that long ago, in Frankford, the African American children could not go to the high school, because the high school was only for white children. And so they would have to go to Hannibal to go to high school. And they went in this little caboose and at that time we had a railroad track in Frankford, and a train, which we don't have anymore. But they went in this little caboose which they called the Dinky.

Well, there was this one young man, Raymond Campbell, who was always late. And the person who drove the caboose would always wait for him — the conductor —



Stone markers featuring the names of two men from the 62nd and 68th U.S. Colored Infantry, in Little Africa's cemetery.

would always wait for Raymond. Well, he got tired of waiting for Raymond. Everybody got tired of waiting for Raymond. And you know how young people are sometimes. And they said, "Leave him! Leave him! Just leave him!" Well, the conductor listened to them, and they started to leave.

Well, here comes Raymond just a-runnin' down the track, just a-runnin', and Raymond caught up with that Dinky, and grabbed a handful a' Dinky and held on. And that is why Mrs. Camie Doolin was talking about a handful of Dinky. Because Raymond had to hold on to that Dinky all the way to Hannibal! So she said if we were late to church any more, we might find *ourselves* holding a handful of Dinky."

The obvious message in this story is "Don't be late." But the underlying point is that education was so important to this young man that he held onto a caboose all the way from Frankford to Hannibal — a distance of about thirty miles — so that he could attend school that day. It was not uncommon for black children to travel far distances to attend segregated schools when they lacked black schools in their own towns (Greene 1980: 132).

For the past year, Ms. Cogswell has been teaching her repertoire of family sagas and Missouri stories to her apprentice, Deborah Swanegan of Hannibal. Master and apprentice have nothing but glowing words for each other. Ms. Cogswell says, "Our sessions together are something that's just beyond joy." They view their partnership in the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program as the beginning of a life-long relationship.

Both sides of Deborah Swanegan's family come from Chariton County, Missouri, and their presence there goes back many generations to slavery times. Ms. Swanegan's family can trace their roots to "Serpent's Child," an African ancestress from Dahomey. To this day her family observes certain Dahomean traditions, such as a naming ceremony in which new children in the family are given African names. Ms. Swanegan's Dahomean name is Axisi, "Sky Child."

An art teacher at Hannibal High School, Ms. Swanegan is very conscious of the positive role traditional stories can play in shaping cultural awareness and self esteem for contemporary youth. She was drawn to Ms. Cogswell because of the similarity of their family traditions, and her desire to hone her storytelling skills and expand her repertoire in order to share these stories with her students.

As active a raconteur as she is, Gladys Cogswell does not call herself a professional storyteller, because her actual profession is counseling. But she collects, presents, and pursues stories with tremendous zeal and enthusiasm. In addition to performing stories for folklife festivals, at schools and universities, and on the radio (Saturday mornings on KHMO in Hannibal), Ms. Cogswell plans to publish a written collection to be called *By Word of Mouth*. "Storytelling has become a mission for me of late," she explains, "to try to bring about a better understanding of history and to tell what was not and still is not in the school books. Yet at the same time I think there is a need for the kind of storytelling that will bring people together

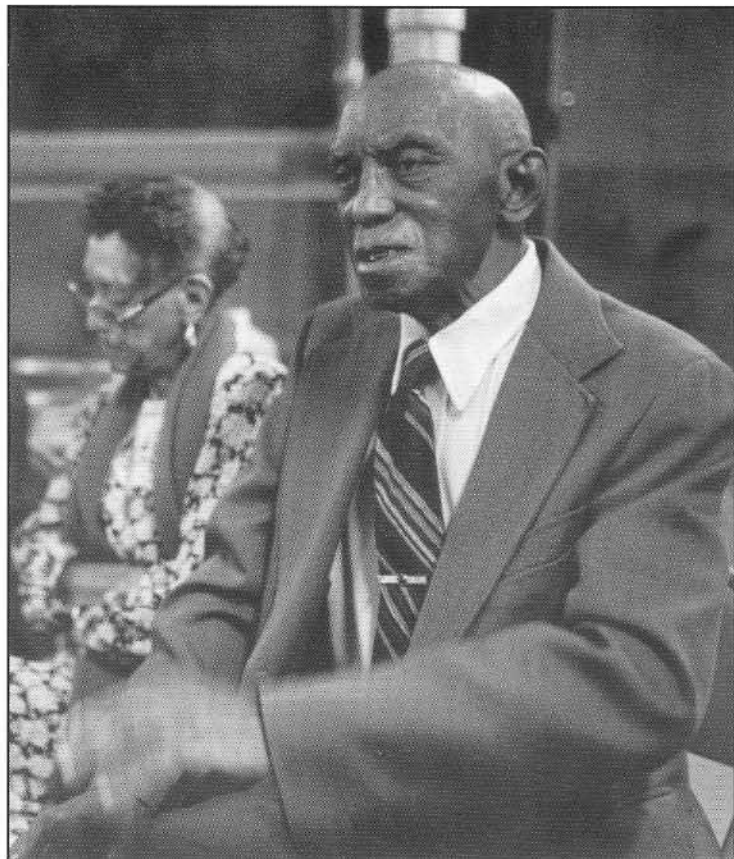


Photo by Dana Everts-Boehm

Reverend M.D. Powers reminisces about when he was principal of Hannibal's black high school, Douglass School, at a storytelling gathering organized by Ms. Cogswell at the Eighth and Center Baptist Church in Hannibal. November, 1991.

rather than pull them apart. I remember my great-grandmother telling me that her mother would always talk about one of the slave owners and his wife as if they were a part of her family or she was a part of their family. My great-grandmother said she'd ask, "How could you like those people?" Her mother would say, "They is God's chillen too, and you supposed to love *all* God's chillen."

The moral values conveyed by the stories Ms. Cogswell learned as a child are uppermost in the versions she tells to children today. This final example, told to the children at Jefferson City, is one she often uses to conclude her programs:

Another story that I heard as a child, and then later on from Miss Camie, and then from a janitor who works at St. Louis University, has to do with hands. And this one, it was really a lesson for us. One of the lessons was to listen to older people. And another one was not to be annoyed that older people know more, because they've been through more. As my great-grandmother said, "They done paid their dues."

This story is about two little boys and an old man. The old man used to sit on his porch all the time rockin' and pattin' his foot and smokin' his pipe, as sometimes old men will do. And these two little boys used to like to go and tease this old man. And they'd get so mad because he knew



Gladys Coggswell introduces her apprentice, Deborah Swanegan, at storytelling performance in Jefferson City. April, 1992.

Photo by Dana Everts-Boehm



Deborah Swanegan tells "The Walnut Eater," a story she learned from Ms. Coggswell.

Photo by Dana Everts-Boehm

everything. There was nothing they could ask him, nothing they could talk about that he didn't already know about.

Now these two little boys didn't have an ounce of purity in their souls. So they were *determined* that they were gonna make this old man wrong. They got together one day, and one of them said to the other one, "You know, I'm sick and tired of that old man. I'm sick and *tired* of him always thinking he know *everythang*." And the other one said, "Well, I know what we could do." And the other one said, "What?" He said, "Go get us a bird. We gonna put it in our hands. And we'll go up to that old man, say, Old man, you see this bird we got in our hands? Ummm, ummm. And we gonna ask him whether it's dead or alive. If he say it's alive, we gonna *crush* it and *kill* it! If he say it's dead, we gonna open our hands and let it go!"

Well, the other little boy, he goes, "Ah, ha ha ha ha ha! That sounds good to me! Good, good, good, good!" So they got a bird. Went up to the old man, just laughing, oh, they could hardly contain their laughter. They just knew he was gonna be wrong, and they couldn't wait to see his face when he was wrong.

"Old man! You see this bird we got in our hands? Is it dead or is it alive?" And the old man took his pipe out of his mouth, rocked a little, patted his foot a little, and he smiled, and he said, "Chillen, it's in yo' hands."

The message that life is what we make it is a compelling statement coming from a people who have been subjected to centuries of human rights abuses, and from an individual who

has experienced great personal loss. While still a girl, Ms. Coggsell was effectively orphaned when her great-grandmother had to be institutionalized for mental illness. "Prior to that, she used to talk and sing to me all the time. So that was very devastating, because by the time I was fourteen, she did not know who I was." Reflecting on the many painful stories passed down to her, Ms. Coggsell muses, "I often wonder if that's why my great-grandmother had her nervous breakdown. Because she used to talk about these things all the time."

Yet Ms. Coggsell firmly believes in the innate value and significance of her family's oral traditions, and the power of storytelling to educate and inspire others. "It's just something that is a part of me because it was a part of my great-grandmother," she says. "It was the part I could hold on to." There remains much to be learned about African American cultural traditions and historical experiences in Missouri, and much of that information is in the hands of "twentieth century griots" like Gladys Coggsell.



Gladys Coggsell, master storyteller. November, 1991.

Photo by Dana Everts-Boehm

Glossary of Terms

aetiological legend: a story which purports to explain the origin of natural phenomena, such as the waxing and waning of the moon.

Also called **explanatory legend**.

asfidity bags: The folk term for asafetida bags. Asafetida is a foul smelling resinous material obtained from plants of the genus *Ferula* that was commonly used by African Americans and other groups to ward off colds and flu in the winter. Asafetida was placed in a bag and worn around the neck.

conjure legend: a type of supernatural legend that reflects beliefs in voodoo (see below).

folktale: a well structured, fanciful story featuring a traditional plot, identifiable motifs, stock characters such as lowly heroes, and stylistic devices such as the use of formulas. Folktales are not told as true in the sense of having actually happened, but they convey moral and social truths.

griot: In West Africa, a highly trained professional who chronicles tribal history and genealogy, and is also trained in oral poetry, music, and traditional narration. In the United States, the term is used more loosely as a designation for African American storytellers and oral historians, but these individuals have not undergone the same kind of rigorous training as their African counterparts.

memorate: a narrative based on a personal experience story, which is told by someone who is several persons removed from the individual who experienced the event.

patterollers: The folk term for "patrollers," a white volunteer police force that patrolled the roads and woods for runaway slaves.

Throughout the South it was illegal for blacks to be away from their master's land without written permission, so the patrollers would check their passes. Patrollers were dreaded by the black community as they often took advantage of their power to harass both slaves and freedmen.

personal experience story: an account of an experience that happened to the narrator.

supernatural legend: A story that is told as true, which reflects traditional beliefs in supernatural beings such as ghosts, and belief complexes such as voodoo.

tall tale: a highly exaggerated account involving impossible feats, told in the first person as if true, but not generally believed to be true. Tellers of tall tales are often called "liars" and many towns in rural America hold "liars contests" in which the most unbelievable and best told tale wins.

voodoo: Also referred to in the United States as hoodoo or conjure, voodoo is a belief complex found throughout the Americas that is derived from West African religion. The complex entails the concept that practitioners have the ability to control nature and human beings through the use of plants, incantations, bones, and special objects.

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THE MASTERS & their traditional arts

The Masters and Their Traditional Arts

"The Masters and Their Traditional Arts" is a series of brochures written by experts in Missouri traditional arts. This brochure was written by Dana Everts-Boehm, with editing assistance from C. Ray Brassieur, Prahlad Folly, and Howard Wight Marshall, and transcribing assistance from Lisa Redfern. It is based on a design by Spencer Galloway for the series.

The Project

In 1984, the National Endowment for the Arts offered funds to states that wished to honor traditional artists and encourage them to pass on their skills. These artists, who learned their skills in their communities through apprenticeship and imitation of respected models rather than through academic studies, have often been neglected. Many authentic traditional arts that once flourished in Missouri communities, such as African American jazz tap dance and wooden johnboat construction, have begun to disappear and are worthy of recognition and conservation.

The Missouri Arts Council and the Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Missouri developed our state's program to honor traditional artists. We call this innovative program the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program.

To begin, we use research to learn what kinds of communities exist in the state. Who were Missouri's first settlers? What groups came later, and what groups are still coming? We try to find artists who still have the important skills and encourage them to work with a new generation.

A state-wide panel of experts in traditional music, art, and cultural heritage select participants from the many applications. The experts ask such questions as: Is the artist part of a community where the art is an important part of life? Is the art in danger of dying out? Is the artist a true master in his or her field? Does the artist's work show excellence?

The Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program is now eight years old. A traveling exhibition, produced by the Missouri State Museum, Department of Natural Resources, features the work of many of the participating artists and suggests how their art fits into the community. The exhibition, "The Masters," is a landmark exhibition, the first to honor traditional artists from across Missouri who have been selected both for excellence and authenticity by a state-wide panel of experts. (by Margot Ford McMillen, program coordinator 1983-5).

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