

Missouri Folk Arts Program

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At the Missouri Folk Arts Program, we are celebrating “TAAP @ 30,” our shorthand for the thirtieth anniversary of the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program (TAAP). In anticipation of the anniversary, graduate assistants surveyed master artists, as well as former TAAP coordinators and administrators. Current staff and volunteers have scoured in-house archives and our collection at the State Historical Society of Missouri, accessing reports, grant proposals, newsletters, and images to research, compose, and share the story of MFAP’s core project.

What was first called Missouri’s Folk Arts Apprenticeship program in 1984 had something of a legendary birth, at least within the cadre of folklorists and staff who have managed the project. Dr. Howard W. Marshall, then director of the Missouri Cultural Heritage Center, has recalled that he received a phone call from Bess Lomax Hawes, the venerable leader of Folk and Traditional Arts (1977–1992) at the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Hawes was fulfilling her vision—a nationwide infrastructure of state folk

arts coordinators and traditional arts projects. Missouri already had the former, and she strongly encouraged Dr. Marshall to apply for a grant to fund the latter, a pilot apprenticeship project. He and a Missouri Arts Council colleague put their heads together at Shakespeare’s Pizza in Columbia and scratched out a grant proposal outline on a paper napkin. Marshall notes “the rest is history.”

According to a 1984 report about the project submitted by Barry Bergey, Missouri’s first state folk arts coordinator, over three hundred applications were mailed, and forty-five completed applications were submitted. Staff and an advisory panel reviewed applications and selected ten master artists that first year to teach gospel piano, button box accordion, jazz violin, and seven old-time fiddle traditions. The very first apprenticeship lessons commenced on December 10, 1984, and continued for fourteen weeks. From Hawes’ phone call and that napkin, a project was born that has endured for thirty years. Now known as the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program, the project continues as a partnership between the University of Missouri and the Missouri Arts Council,

administered for the last twenty-one years under the auspices of the Missouri Folk Arts Program at the Museum of Art and Archaeology.

In 1985, Bergey left Missouri to join Hawes at the NEA, where he eventually became the venerable leader of Folk and Traditional Arts. Thirty years after Bergey helped establish TAAP in Missouri, he retired in November, 2014. In the years since Mr. Bergey headed to Washington, Missouri’s apprenticeship program has been in the good hands of many folk arts specialists, including Margot McMillen (1985), Keith Frausto (1987), Patrick Janson (1988), Dana Everts-Boehm (1990), and, for almost fifteen years now, Deborah A. Bailey (2000). Each spent hours in the field, documenting master artists as they taught apprentices in lessons and participated in public performances. The results: Nineteen linear feet of archival boxes; several full file cabinet drawers; and hundreds of thousands of megabytes on a public drive (and backed up on archival media). More importantly, the results are sustained traditions, lifelong friendships, and magnified lives. The images below tell a bit of the story. ■



In 1990, Bess Lomax Hawes (right) visited Missouri to address the annual conference of the Missouri Arts Council and celebrate its 25th anniversary, as well as recognize quilter Mabel Murphy (left) of Fulton, who received a 1989 National Heritage Fellowship. In her speech, Hawes noted: “Every individual, regardless of the aesthetic system of his or her family or community, needs to see their aesthetic system treated with respect, appreciation, and genuine understanding. When this happens, the individual can allow him or herself to be open to other aesthetic experiences and become gladdened by variety, rather than frightened or angered.”



Kansas City jazz fiddler Claude Williams and Columbia guitarist Lyles Harris perform at the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition. Bergey recalls that the first year of the apprenticeship program focused on music, primarily Missouri fiddle traditions. “We knew that there were a variety of fiddle styles in the state and that artists had already been identified who could benefit from the program. Knowing that successful apprenticeship programs require intensive personal outreach to, and encouragement of, individual artists, we felt that we could get a program up and running quickly by targeting music.”



Master dulcimer musician William Graves of Lebanon, Mo. laughs during a lesson with his apprentice Stephen Atwell in 1987. The dulcimer was built and passed down from Graves' grandfather, and Mr. Graves shared the tradition with neighbors and family members, including son Don, who led apprenticeships with his grandchildren in 2010 and 2011. Former TAAP coordinator Margot McMillen notes: "Interviewing so many traditional artists made a big impact on my life. I think the thing I really learned was how important the community was to them and to their families . . . I have tried to hold that thought as my own rural community has been threatened by industrialization . . ."

FOLK ARTS
Missouri's
30th
Annual Traditional Arts
Apprenticeship
Program



Mildred Whitehorn, gospel solo vocalist, sings with the Homestown Church of God in Christ choir in Pemisnot County, Mo. A 1995 TAAP master artist, Whitehorn was the impetus for a Missouri Masters and their Traditional Arts essay by TAAP administrator and MFAP director Dana Everts-Boehm. Whitehorn is but one of the "inspirational, skillful, eloquent, and amazing people" Everts-Boehm documented during her nine years with the program. Everts-Boehm says: "They sustained me through some of the difficult moments and reminded me that my job was inherently positive and worthwhile."

Fardin Karamkhani plays one of his handmade instruments at his St. Louis home during a 2002 site visit. Karamkhani, a Kurdish musician and instrument maker from Iran, relocated to St. Louis after living in three other countries to escape fundamentalist suppression of secular music. MFAP's current folk arts specialist Deborah A. Bailey, soon to celebrate fifteen years with the program, asserts that: "There is no doubt that traditional artists are my most influential and significant teachers . . . communicating tangible knowledge about their art forms, the creative processes, aesthetics, and the inextricable connections to cultural and regional heritage."

