

Missouri Folk Arts Program

Sarah Denton

Community Scholar

Sarah Denton has participated in MFAP's Community Scholars Network since its inception at the first workshop in 2010. In June, 2016, Denton visited Sugar Creek, Mo., to document an ethnic festival that celebrates the people who immigrated from Eastern Europe to work at the Standard Oil refinery and their descendants. The festival is funded in part with a Missouri Arts Council Folk Arts grant. In anticipation of the festival, June 9–10, 2017, she shares her observations and photographs.

Each June for over three decades, Sugar Creek, Mo., has been home to the Sugar Creek Slavic Festival, which celebrates the shared Slavic culture of the hard-working people who migrated here from the Ukraine and neighboring areas. The all-volunteer Sugar Creek Fair and Festival Board holds the event on the Mike Onka Memorial Building grounds, with proceeds going to support local civic activities and improvements. Thousands of visitors, many of Slavic background themselves, attend this feast of a festival each year, to bask in the rich heritage of the Slavic community through dance, song, craft, and gaiety. Visitors also enjoy plenty of good old-world food and beer.

When we arrived, my companion Gene Weinbeck and I walked the festival grounds, where we were met by the smell of roasting kielbasa and the sounds of rehearsing *tamburitza* musicians. In a covered exhibition area, we visited crafts people and studied a historical display of the Sugar Creek Slavic Festival that included photos, newspaper articles, fliers, and recipes. Then, we observed (and sampled from) traditional meals of *sarma* (cabbage rolls), kielbasa and sauerkraut, cabbage slaw, and Croatian potato salad, as well as *haluski*, *roznijici*, *kolache*, *povitica*, and strudel.



Thompson applies design to egg using black wax and stylus.



Finished *pysanky* displayed at the artists' booth. The black egg in the foreground is covered in Christian symbols (crosses, stars, and fishing nets).

Gene and I spent quite a bit of time interviewing a mother-daughter *pysanky* team, Irene Thompson and her mother Frieda Kossyk. In their case, tradition followed a somewhat non-traditional path. Irene first took up the tradition of decorating eggs by way of her Ukrainian father. She then taught her mother Frieda. Today, Irene and Frieda have been decorating *pysanky* for more than forty years combined.

As she demonstrated for us, Irene explained that egg decorating is practiced in most Slavic countries and has pagan roots. She told us *pysanka* means “to write” because the designs are written (first with the pencil, then with beeswax), not painted. The tools of *pysanky* are simple and include hollow eggs (chicken, turkey and duck are most common), *kistka* (the drawing stylus), dyes, beeswax, pencil, spoons, cotton swabs, soft cloth or paper towels, and a solvent. Kits and instruction books of designs were available at Irene and Frieda's booth, along with dozens of finished *pysanky*. Irene demonstrated each step: handling the delicate hollow eggshell, penciling in the design, applying black wax, soaking the egg in the dye, and removing the wax with a solvent. We found that even the first stage of the dying process—sapphire blue dye against the stark, black lines of wax on the eggshell—was beautiful.

Irene spoke, too, of the hundreds of designs traditionally used, from early pagan symbols to the incorporation of Christian symbols—and the ways the two interweave. Even the chosen colors or color combinations are symbolic. Symbols vary from curls (for defense or protection) to rows or clusters of dots (tears of Mary at the Crucifixion or stars



Pysanky makers Irene Thompson and her mother Frieda Kossyk.

Save the Date!
The 2017
Sugar Creek Slavic Festival
 Friday and Saturday
 June 9-10, 2017
 Learn more at
www.slavicfest.com



Traditional Slavic meal consisting of kielbasa and sauerkraut, Croatian potato salad, and slaw.



Women members of the Sugar Creek's Ethnic Dance Troupe set to perform *kolo* dances.

in the heavens), ram's horn (strength and leadership) and many more. Irene told us it is common for a single household to make as many as sixty or more *pysanky* in preparation for the Easter holiday or other special occasion. As the tradition evolves, *pysanky* are sometimes painted at Christmastime with Christian and pagan symbols finding common ground by adorning the same tree. For Irene and Frieda, this detail-oriented tradition is also a fun way to spend long winter hours.

Later, at the portable outdoor stage, Gene and I listened to local and headliner bands: the Sugar Creek Tamburitza, Hrvatshi Obicaj, Marina Savage, and Grammy-nominee Alex Meixner. The Sugar Creek Tamburitzas, the small city's group of ethnic musicians, has been performing a variety of traditional Slavic songs on traditional instruments since at least 1970, and has toured widely. Sugar Creek's local Kolo Kids, a

youth group learning their community's traditions, performed dances on the street, including the famous Chicken Dance. Local male performers in the more advanced Ethnic Dance Troupe presented high-energy, comedic, nearly-acrobatic dance skills with knives and fighting sticks. All dancers wore traditional costumes, embroidered and hung with colorful ribbons. Women and girls wore the most richly-embellished costumes, from their *vinok* (flower and ribbon headpieces), vests or aprons, to flowing skirts and form-fitting dance shoes and boots.

The evening wound down with full bellies, Slavic beers, dance music, and smiling faces. ■