

Missouri Folk Arts Program

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Director

“Missouri 2021” and “Missouri 200” are shorthand for the Show Me State’s two-hundredth anniversary of statehood, coming up this August 10, 2021. Michael Sweeney, the Missouri Bicentennial Coordinator for the State Historical Society of Missouri, first contacted me on August 8, 2017, and we met in Columbia for coffee two weeks later on August 22, just a day after that spectacular solar eclipse. A few more meetings and a year after that first email, Missouri Folk Arts and the Missouri Arts Council formally accepted Michael’s invitation to join the Bicentennial Alliance: a “coalition of statewide non-profit organizations and government agencies working together to develop and promote statewide projects.”

Over the last three and a half years, Michael has often emailed to ask “have time for coffee?” Indeed, I did, and we would meet at Kaldi’s or the public library or Fretboard or Starbucks on his way to or from another appointment. From my experience, Michael’s face-to-face talks are very likely the key to what will be a robust and meaningful commemoration, with active participation from individuals representing Missouri’s diversity and organizations of all sizes. To date, Michael tells me, he has logged over 130,000 miles, visiting every county in the state, stopping to talk formally or informally with chambers of commerce, convention and visitors bureaus, community betterment groups, colleges and universities, historical and genealogical societies, arts councils, public libraries, museums and archives, extension offices, and so on.

Occasionally, someone emails me about the bicentennial: “Michael Sweeney suggested we talk to you.” My answer to all has been “yes.” In addition to drinking coffee and fielding emails, I have also contributed to others’ bicentennial projects in very small, and larger, ways. In 2019, I added a dab of paint onto a giant, multi-panel, paint-



Michael Sweeney discusses the connections and themes found in the Missouri Bicentennial Quilt, which includes 115 squares, one for each county plus the city of St. Louis, Mo. Photo by Lisa L. Higgins.

by-triangle, Missouri mural, a public art project created by visual artists Aaron Horrell and Barb Bailey. In 2020, I provided feedback and images for a Mizzou School of Music bicentennial book project, as well as brainstormed with two Missouri State University professors of music, who are working with six composers on new works inspired by Missouri culture, including its musical traditions. Just a month ago, I joined Michael to see the spectacular Bicentennial Quilt, a Missouri 2021 signature project, at the Hotel Frederick in Boonville. In mid-January, he and I will share a Zoom screen to deliver a “State of Stories” talk about quilting for The Story Center, a division of the Mid-Continent Public Library. [Never fear, I will present a similar talk for Museum Associate’s Art of the Book Club. See the *Magazine* calendar for details.]

We at Missouri Folk Arts have three projects in the works, tying into the bicentennial. In 2019, the William J. Pomeroy Foundation invited us to sign

on as an official “Legends & Lore Marker Grant Program” partner representing Missouri. The foundation provides grant funds to local hosts in eleven states (so far) to commemorate and celebrate local folklore and legends—ghost stories, supernatural beings, hyperbolic tales—with roadside markers. The foundation is set to announce Missouri’s first



Lisa Higgins, right, and Paint for a Cause co-founder Barb Bailey meet on Pizzou’s Lowry Mall, where students, faculty, and staff added to the mural. Photo courtesy of Paint for Cause.



A generic Legends & Lore sign (above). Local signs will briefly describe the local folklore, as well as credit Missouri Folk Arts as a partner, like the sign at the right. Image courtesy of the Wm. J. Pomeroy Foundation.



“Celebrate and explore the rich history and diversity of the State.”

—Michael Sweeney
Missouri Bicentennial Coordinator for the State Historical Society of Missouri

marker at any moment, and the tale is haunting. Thanks to Michael Sweeney, we have several communities interested in submitting proposals in May and October.

Additionally, Missouri Folk Arts launched a digital storytelling series on social media, *200 Stories*, on January 1, 2021. The series of stories, primarily available on our Facebook page, will feature traditional artists, partnering organizations, community scholars, Missouri Arts Council Folk Arts grantees, and more. As of the *Magazine* deadline, we are on story five of 200. We have planned four stories a week for fifty-two weeks. Taylor Estraca, a Mizzou English major, recently joined our staff to organize, draft, and post stories. In just weeks on the job, she has proved already to be the perfect person for the job.

Finally, we look forward, with hope, to the opportunity to partner with Michael to present folk and traditional artists on two occasions in August, an outdoor event in Columbia at the Center for Missouri Studies and the Missouri State Fair in Sedalia. We have drafted a list of potential performing and demonstrating artists, along with a working budget, with plans to confirm the details in the upcoming weeks. Check social media for Missouri 2021 and Missouri Folk Arts for details as they are posted.

Missouri 2021, the Bicentennial Alliance, the Bicentennial Commission, and numerous local entities have been hard at work for months and months to develop a series of meaningful programs and commemorative projects grounded in Missouri’s past **and** present. Some kicked off in 2020; most will launch this year. Many are virtual and accessible

via the internet. The best place to learn more is at <https://missouri2021.org/>. We look forward throughout this year to, as Michael Sweeney wrote in that August 2017 email, “celebrate and explore the rich history and diversity of the State.” Hopefully, there may also be time for coffee with Michael. ■

