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# Anchored in Community — Folk Arts and the Local Arts Agency

by Robert Baron, Folk Arts Program Director, New York State Council on the Arts

**A**s this tumultuous century draws to a close, two cultural trends rub up against each other. Places the world over seem more and more the same: fast food, the American entertainment industry, mass communications and cybernetic technologies are penetrating even the most remote areas. However, homogenizing forces threatening cultural distinctiveness face a powerful counter-trend as local, ethnic and regional communities assert their identities with growing intensity. In the United States, a deepening concern for tradition is evident as we explore our cultural heritages and family histories, experience artistic expressions of diverse cultures, and seek greater personal stability by strengthening ties to our own localities.

*“... folk arts programming is perfectly suited to local arts agencies. After all, LAAs should be on the front lines of providing services for arts that express the unique characteristics of their communities.”*

Traditional folk arts are anchored in local communities, affording welcome alternatives to the mediated experiences offered by mass entertainment and centralized culture industries. Folk arts are created among friends and family, express the shared aesthetics of communities, and are generally practiced in the immediacy of face-to-face interaction. Folk arts are often mistakenly viewed as fragile, unchanging expressions threatened by the relentless onslaught of technology and mass communications. Folklorists have long recognized that folk arts are, in fact, always emerging. As a living cultural heritage, they link the past and present. Folk arts change in form and content over time, adapting to new circumstances as they maintain their traditional qualities. New technologies ranging from the printing press to radio, audio recording, photocopying and video have reinvigorated many traditional arts by facilitating their documentation, transmission and dissemination. While technology contributes to the globalization and homogenization of culture, it also provides tools of resistance for communities seeking to create, preserve and perpetuate valued traditions.

Since it is so intimately tied to local culture and heritage, folk arts programming is perfectly suited to local arts agencies (LAAs). After all, LAAs should be on the front lines of providing services for arts that express the unique characteristics of their communities. Curiously, involvement of LAAs with this oldest and most enduring kind of cultural expression has only begun to flourish the last few years. Local arts agencies pioneering folk arts programming have found that it opens new relationships to underserved sectors of their communities, furthers mutual understanding between different cultural groups, and offers accessible new artistic experiences.



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*“Through involvement with a broadening range of art forms and communities, LAAs capture new constituencies composed of diverse ethnic, occupational, generational and religious groups.”*

During the special folk arts track at the 1996 NALAA convention in St. Louis, folklorists and traditional artists will join local arts administrators to discuss a variety of models for LAAs interested in engaging in the presentation and perpetuation of folk arts. Recognizing that folk arts programming represents an uncharted field of local arts activity for many LAAs, participants in the convention will address basic questions related to the development of projects and approaches: How can a folk arts project be initiated with limited resources and little knowledge of where traditional artists can be found in a community? What are the methods of identifying, documenting and presenting artists who practice their traditions in everyday life situations within their own communities? How can a folk arts program be institutionalized within a local arts organization primarily devoted to arts services? Who are the artists practicing emerging, contemporary traditions in American communities? What does “diversity” mean in a folk arts context at a time when multiculturalism is a charged issue? How do folk arts in education programs utilize local folk arts resources to enable young people to explore a community’s traditions, facilitate new kinds of arts education programming and shape curriculum development? These questions suggest the creative challenges faced by the local folk arts projects to be featured at the 1996 NALAA annual convention.

Any local arts agency in tune with its community tries to address the needs of multiple constituencies. Perhaps the greatest divide facing an LAA separates those people who are not embarrassed to admit that they like “art” and feel capable of appreciating it, and others who choose to spend their leisure hours and discretionary dollars on activities which they do not single out as artistic. Alas, most people fall within the latter category — even though everyone’s life partakes of the aesthetic through activities such as participating in traditional festivals and religious celebrations; making traditional textile arts to give to family or friends; adorning the body, home and yard; performing, listening and dancing to music; playing traditional children’s games, and telling stories about unusual and everyday events. LAAs involved with folk arts recognize this expansive view of the aesthetic and present the best practitioners of traditional arts, who have been aptly called “ordinary people doing extraordinary things.” Through involvement with a broadening range of art forms and communities, LAAs capture new constituencies composed of diverse ethnic, occupational, generational and religious groups.

**Fresno Arts Council, Fresno, California**

The Fresno Arts Council’s folk arts program grew out of a concern that the Council was not adequately serving the diverse cultural communities of the central San Joaquin Valley. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, it redefined its mission and revamped its board through the appointment of a number of new members more representative of the cultural diversity of its service area. The new board recognized a pressing need to determine how to serve a changing region which includes Latinos and the descendants of Dust Bowl migrants who farm the most productive agricultural lands

on earth, refugees from Southeast Asia, one of the largest concentration of Armenians in the nation, and a remarkable variety of other ethnic communities. Within the larger community, a broad based folklife consortium made up of representatives of 20 cultural and social service organizations called for the development of a folk arts program that would document and present the traditions of their region. The consortium viewed the Fresno Arts Council as the most appropriate organization for this program.

Like other LAAs involved with folk arts, the Fresno Arts Council recognized that it needed to hire a folklorist to provide essential professional direction. Folklorists are trained to document traditional arts and interpret them within their cultural contexts. Many folklorists nowadays consider themselves “public folklorists,” associating themselves with a branch of their profession which specializes in applying folklore scholarship to community needs, aiding local efforts to revitalize traditions and presenting folk arts to new audiences.

Amy Kitchener has served as the Fresno Arts Council’s folk arts program director since 1993. In designing this program, she carefully assessed how to shape her activities to meet the needs of the Council for outreach to diverse communities and relate folk arts programming effectively to ongoing Council projects. Like other LAA folk arts program directors, Kitchener’s work has a dual thrust encompassing intensive collaborative work with particular groups to enable them to teach, document and present traditions within their own communities, as well as the development of programs to present a group’s traditions to general, multi-ethnic audiences.

All of Kitchener’s programs emphasize the linkages which connect generations through folk arts. Her first public program for a general audience was an exhibition at the Fresno Metropolitan Museum of three Armenian craftspersons, including a father and son who are both silversmiths. Their work was exhibited with the embroidery of Lily Vorperian, who is a winner of the NEA’s National Heritage Award, the nation’s highest honor for our “national treasures” in the traditional arts. Kitchener chose this exhibition as her initial public program because it involved accessible traditions of widely recognized excellence and illustrated intergenerational continuities.

Mono basketry is an ancient Native American tradition no longer widely practiced. Kitchener sought to bolster community-based revitalization of Mono basketry through facilitating a workshop for local Native Americans. The teaching process was intensively documented and became the subject of an exhibition, “The Ties that Bind - The Art of Teaching and Learning Mono Basketry.” It explored the motivations, processes, materials and cultural meanings involved in teaching this tradition. The exhibition included family photographs of several generations of basket makers and excerpts from texts of interviews along with baskets made by masters and their students.

Since she first began at the Fresno Arts Council, Kitchener has spent great amounts of time out of the office conducting documentation. Field research is at the heart of the work of public folklorists. Through field research, folklorists identify artists to participate in public programs, create materials for presentation to the public (such as the photographs of Mono basketmaking), and leave behind,

in an appropriate repository, an enduring record of traditions for which no other documentation usually exists.



Enthusiastic community fieldworkers trained by Kitchener are collaborating with her to document Mexican American Christmas traditions and the oral sung poetry of Hmong refugees from Laos. Like traditions of new immigrants everywhere, the Kwv Txhij poems sung by Hmong during courtship and at new year's celebrations are threatened by lack of interest from young people absorbed by popular culture. The Fresno Arts Council has triggered new interest among Hmong of all ages in this

Procession in Mendota, California, part of Mexican American celebrations for the feast day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, December 12, 1994.

Photo credit: Scott Anger

tradition through initiating a class at the Hmong Language Institute and aiding the systematic recording of Kwv Txhij by a Hmong fieldworker. When Kitchener began a project to document Christmas traditions of the central San Joaquin Valley's large Mexican community, she initiated a collaboration with Arte. Américas, an organization led by a community organizer, Lilia Chavez. Asked about *nacimiento* (nativity scenes), Chavez experienced a pleasant shock of recognition when she remembered that she had made traditional nativity scenes as a child with her mother and recognized herself as a tradition bearer. During the Christmas season, Chavez joined in documenting artists in her community continuing this tradition and makers of other types of traditional Christmas practices. Chavez was struck by the responses of artists documented in this project, who felt validated for their involvement in traditions neglected within the Mexican American community in recent years. One artist greeted her by saying, "Thank you for not forgetting us." This project also includes several other community fieldworkers. Public programs resulting from the documentation will include an exhibition and video documentary.

Kitchener is now increasingly concerned with developing ongoing, core programming in addition to special projects intensively focused upon particular ethnic groups. Exhibition space secured at the Fresno Metropolitan Museum will be used for continuing a series of exhibitions about regional and ethnic traditions. An exhibition about cowboy boot making is now being planned. A folk artist

residency program for schools includes a group of Native American artists as well as residencies involving Mexican American, Irish and Southeast Asian performers. Kitchener hopes that the packaging of school programs will help generate a steady source of revenue for her program as it continues to deepen and extend the Fresno Arts Council's relationships with new constituencies.

### **Regional Arts and Culture Council of Metropolitan Portland, Portland, Oregon**

Relatively few LAAs are able to sustain such an ambitious year-round folk arts program and employ a professional folklorist on a full-time basis. Collaborations with state folk arts programs have enabled a number of other LAAs to undertake folk arts projects. Most states have folk arts coordinators, many of whom are based at state arts agencies, who engage in documentation, produce programming, help secure funding and provide services to local organizations interested in developing traditional arts projects. Through collaborating with the Oregon Folk Arts Program of the Oregon Historical Society, the Regional Arts and Culture Council of Metropolitan Portland has maintained a

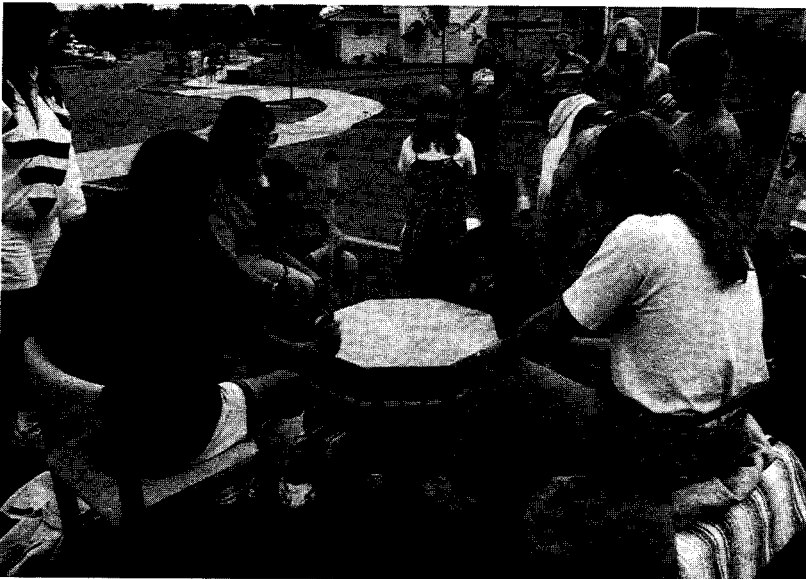
major folk arts component in its Neighborhood Arts Program.

The Neighborhood Arts Program enables residents of economically depressed communities and at-risk youth to experience the arts within the intimate and informal contexts where folk traditions thrive. In establishing the Neighborhood Arts Program, the Regional Arts and Culture Council animated a primary goal of Arts Plan 2000, a cultural plan for Metropolitan Portland which emphasizes situating cultural programs in neighborhood settings.

Arts Plan 2000 called for arts programming associated with families and youth programs,

multi-cultural outreach and projects to stimulate neighborhood development and pride. Neighborhood Arts Program Director Alberto Ráfols incorporated a substantial folk arts component in this program because he feels that traditional arts offer an "ideal form to connect people to community," instill self-esteem, and facilitate intercultural understanding.

The traditional artists selected by Oregon Folk Arts Program Director Nancy Nusz are chosen from among hundreds of artists documented by her program since 1988. Nusz works closely with each artist to prepare them for the needs of the highly experiential, participatory and educationally



Fool Soldier Drum performs Native American drumming for a Gresham, Oregon, neighborhood lunch program. This was a summer 1995 presentation of the Neighborhood Arts Program.

*Photo Credit: Oregon Folk Arts Program*

oriented Neighborhood Arts Program. When an artist performs or demonstrate a tradition, he or she explains how the art was learned from family members or neighbors, its meaning for members of the culture and the technical processes used to create the art form.

Family service centers facilitate Neighborhood Arts Program activities, which are presented for multiethnic as well as culturally specific groups. The Eastwind Center in Gresham (a city east of Portland) found that a participatory workshop by a Native American beadworker was an eye-opening experience for an ethnically mixed, at-risk group of teenage girls. These girls were impressed with the complexity of this tradition and engrossed by the beadworker's accounts of the uses and meanings of beadwork among Native Americans. African American youth served by Self Enhancement, Inc., in the north Portland neighborhood of Albina eagerly attended two-week classes taught by an Angolan basketmaker and storyteller, a Ghanaian drummer and an African American gospel musician. Ráfols feels that such programming "connects and opens up people," with especially marked results among withdrawn young people who interact poorly with peers, the emotionally troubled and youth under the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice system.

As folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett puts it, folk arts are "an accessible aesthetic." Neighborhood Arts Program activities maintain the face-to-face quality of the traditional arts. They occur "close to home," in such settings as a parking lot in a housing project for a mariachi concert, and in store windows for exhibitions of Greek embroidery and Chinese papercutting in the Oldtown/ Chinatown district, in a transitional downtown area initiating a neighborhood revitalization effort. These contexts resonate well with residents who rarely attend arts events outside of their immediate neighborhood.

The Neighborhood Arts Program is successfully implementing a key element of metropolitan Portland's Arts Plan 2000. This cultural plan showed great foresight in its emphasis upon inclusive arts experiences occurring in highly localized neighborhood settings.

### **Maine Arts Commission, Augusta, Maine**

A new approach to the development of cultural plans created by the Maine Arts Commission demonstrates how the planning process itself can be undertaken in a more inclusive manner through the incorporation of folklore fieldwork methods.

Kathleen Mundell wears two hats at the Maine Art Commission, where she directs both the folk arts and community arts programs. A cultural assessment and planning initiative undertaken in collaboration with the Lewiston city planning office and L-A Arts provided her with an opportunity to meld folklore methodologies with conventional approaches to community cultural planning. Mundell

believed that field research would identify “grassroots groups left out” of standard approaches to cultural planning, which typically overlook groups who “nobody knows how to identify and contact” and are “not hooked up” to existing arts institutions. A folklife survey by consulting folklorist Tina Bucuvalas identified cultural needs and resources among 14 ethnic groups in the cities of Lewiston and Auburn. Her field research opened new windows on artistic life in these cities for the cultural assessment.

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Although Franco Americans make up a majority of the population of Lewiston, their arts have been largely neglected by cultural institutions. The survey identified Franco American traditions with deep roots in French Canada, France and Maine which are practiced in homes among friends and neighbors. Although use of the French language has greatly diminished in recent generations, Franco American culture is now undergoing revitalization. Field researcher Colette Fournier found Franco American heritage maintained in such traditions as a vigorous women’s singing tradition usually performed at home. Her research about this tradition led to an exhibition and concert sponsored by Lewiston-Auburn College which helped awaken local interest in the folk arts of Franco Americans while honoring an art form previously unknown to the larger community.

The cultural assessment and planning undertaken for Lewiston and Auburn combined folklife research with other methods usually used in cultural plans. Project consultant Craig Dreeszen advised about the design of a comprehensive planning process which integrated field research with focus groups, a questionnaire and a public meeting. A noted authority on cultural planning, Dreeszen feels that the folklore component in the planning process provided a “door-to-door, face-to-face intimacy” which marks a major innovation in assessment and planning methodologies shaped by the approaches of city planning and market research.

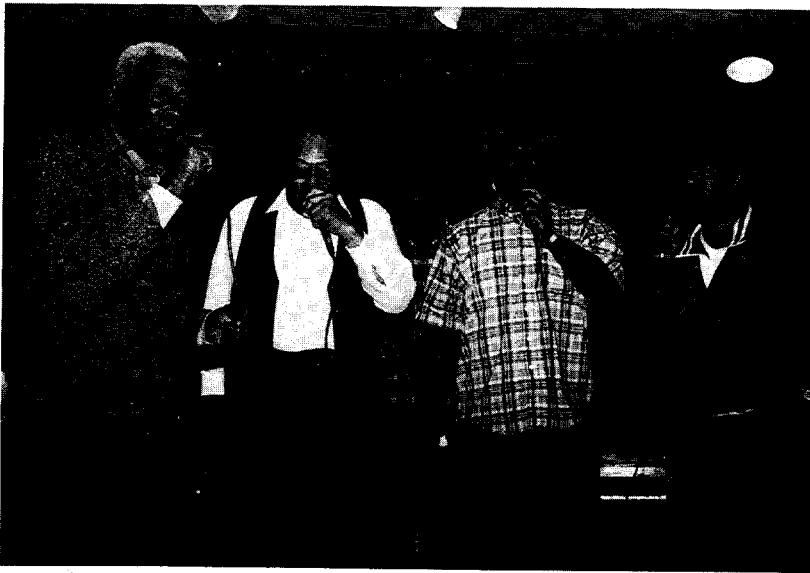
The long-term impact of the folklife components of the Lewiston/Auburn cultural assessment is uncertain. L-A Arts Executive Director Rolf Olsen feels that while traditional folk artists are now more widely recognized in the community as a whole, his LAA is obliged to respond to concerns of local arts organizations to balance the interests of a growing number of local contemporary artists, established arts institutions and traditional artists. A few traditional artists belong to a recently formed individual artists organization, “Artists of the Androscoggen.” Indigenous folk traditions have only begun to be presented outside of their communities of origin since the folklore component of the cultural assessment process was completed. Dreeszen feels that continuity in traditional arts programming could be enhanced through incorporating an action plan for folk arts in the cultural planning process. The introduction of folklore methodologies to community cultural assessment and planning will require additional development to prove fully effective. The approach to cultural assessment developed in Maine provides a guidepost and baseline for LAAs anywhere. This

approach is described in a new publication of the Maine Arts Commission, *Sensing Place - A Guide to Community*, by Hilary Anne Frost-Kumpf and Kathleen Mundell.

Folk arts documentation added an important dimension to local understanding of the cultural resources of Lewiston and Auburn, which already boasted substantial arts activity in other disciplines. In contrast, field research carried out in communities with weakly developed institutional infrastructures in the arts often reveals cultural riches sparkling among the “underserved.”

### Missouri Folk Arts Program, Columbia, Missouri

The Missouri Arts Council turned to the Missouri Folk Arts Program to help it shape the course of arts development in the Bootheel Region, an isolated rural area in the southeast corner of the state.



Gospel quartet “Wings of Heaven” practicing at Mercy Seat Baptist Church in Charleston. (l. to rt.) Frank Ware, Rev. Billy R. Williams, Willie Petty, Jr. (background), Rev. Leroy Reed, George DeMeyers, March 17, 1994.

Photo Credit: Jean Crandall, courtesy of the Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri-Columbia

The Bootheel Underserved Arts Communities Project was carried out by a team of folklorists from the Missouri Folk Arts Program of the University of Missouri - Columbia and the State Historical Society of Missouri. They found an abundance of folk art in the Bootheel, which straddles several regions of the United States along the extreme northern end of the Mississippi Delta. The surprising diversity of the Bootheel’s traditions includes ethnic folk arts practiced by African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans and Jews as well as occupational traditions of boat builders, hunters, fishermen and trappers. While the Bootheel is among the most culturally conservative areas of Missouri,

the folklorists in this project saw creativity flourishing among artists actively innovating within their traditions. They found quilters who introduce new patterns, materials and techniques. The fieldworkers intensively documented boatbuilder Phil Pfuehler of New Madrid, who created a new type of boat for use in hunting from duck blinds. It has an elaborate plywood cabin/blind superstructure which can be used as either an enclosed, heated cabin or a cozy blind when camouflage netting and natural reeds are added.

A report of the project’s findings was presented at a “Bootheel Art and Heritage Day” which included a slide show, roundtable discussions, a barbecue and concert by a quartet of African American women *a cappella* gospel singers. Never before had residents of the highly distinct communities of



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the Bootheel enjoyed such an opportunity to learn about each other’s folk arts. This event also provided an opportunity for fieldworkers and residents to take stock of the traditional cultural resources of the Bootheel region as a whole. The recommendations of this meeting and a publication, *Art and Heritage of the Missouri Bootheel: A Resource Guide*, included greater information sharing about indigenous arts resources, new arts education initiatives and the development of locally managed cultural tourism activities which emphasize traditional folklife. The Bootheel project also included an exhibition on regional folklife which has been traveling to different venues since mid-1994. The opening of the exhibition included performances of African American and Anglo American gospel music — traditions which had rarely, if ever, been presented together in a concert in the region. Bootheel project folklorist C. Ray Brassieur hopes that local initiatives to implement this project will continue to be carried out by local arts agencies and museums with the help of state funding resources. He is currently concerned about whether the Missouri Arts Council will be able to support local folk arts projects and the statewide Missouri Folk Arts Program adequately.

**Rensselaer County Council on the Arts, Troy, New York**

The New York State Council on the Arts folk arts program has been very fortunate to receive substantial funding from the New York State government. Since its establishment in 1985, the program has emphasized the regionalization of folk arts activities throughout the state through funding county-wide and multi-county programs situated in local arts organizations. In 1995, funding of over \$300,000 was provided to year-round programs directed by staff folklorists in nine local arts councils, four museums and one library. Staff folklorists document traditions, provide services to artists and organizations in their service area interested in developing folk arts programs, and organize presentations of local traditions. They constitute a tightly networked professional community and serve as pillars of the infrastructure for folk arts activity in New York State.

The folk arts program of the Rensselaer County Council on the Arts (RCCA) is among the oldest and most multi-faceted in New York State. It grew out of a close relationship formed with members of the local Italian American community who helped sponsor a presentation of *Musica Popolare*, a tour of traditional Italian music and dance produced by the Ethnic Folk Arts Center in New York City. The great success of this concert encouraged RCCA Executive Director Raona Roy to initiate a program to document and present the full spectrum of traditions in her county. From the onset of the program, folk arts provided points of entry to enable new constituencies to participate in the full spectrum of RCCA’s activities. During the first several years of RCCA’s folk arts program, staff folklorist Ellen McHale systematically documented traditions in each of the three major geographical sectors of the county — the Taconic Hills along the Massachusetts and Vermont border, an agricultural and suburban area in the central part of the county increasingly populated by commuters to the Albany area, and the old, richly textured and multi-ethnic industrial city of Troy. Folk arts surveys in

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each sector of the county were followed by presentations for local audiences, including lecture/demonstrations in libraries, a festival in a state park and an exhibition of the folk arts of Troy in RCCA's gallery. Artists documented during the early years of the RCCA program appear frequently in folk arts presentations in their region. A workshop about artists' self-presentation held in 1991 helped a number of artists develop skills for presenting their traditions to new audiences.

Programming for RCCA's folk arts program now consists of core activities held each year and special thematic programs developed from documentation undertaken over prolonged periods. A folk arts component of Troy's annual Riverfront Festival includes performances of regional musical traditions and demonstrations of traditional crafts. These activities occur in an area of the festival separated from the most densely attended sections of the event, allowing festival-goers to interact with traditional artists, try their hand at crafts and observe the work of the artists in close proximity. Another popular annual event is a Halloween installation at a large farm which features an elaborate seasonal display and rural arts practiced at harvest time.

Thematic projects developed by RCCA staff folklorist Mary Zwolinski reflect her interests in local occupational and recreational traditions distinctive to Troy. A project about the culture of boxing focused upon the artistry inherent to prizefighting and oral traditions surrounding this sport, which is popular among young men in small clubs in Troy. Zwolinski recently completed a multi-year project about firefighters, dealing with storytelling, foodways, skills and other aspects of occupational lore. She is now about to launch a project documenting the traditional culture of barber shops and beauty salons, which are nexuses for community life and venues for performing verbal arts in addition to hair adornment. Each of these projects involves intensive documentation by Zwolinski, who works in tandem with a documentary photographer, Nicole Keys, resulting in elegantly designed publications. Public programs provide opportunities for Trojans (residents of Troy) to hear narratives performed and see demonstrations by masters of these occupational practices. Zwolinski's work breaks new ground by exploring the folklife of groups whose traditions are rarely presented in the programs of other local arts agencies, which mainly present ethnic folk arts and, at times, the traditions of older occupations associated with agriculture or maritime trades.

### **In Conclusion**

Folk arts programming by cultural organizations throughout the country has experienced a remarkable growth trajectory in recent years. The upsurge in these activities occurred at a time of sharp retrenchment in other areas of the arts. Increasing uncertainties about public funding now threaten the folk arts field, as other areas of the arts. Nevertheless, a growing number of local arts organizations are actively interested in folk arts programming. Participating in a session about folk arts at the 1989 NALAA annual convention in Atlanta was a lonely experience. Speakers looked out at little

more than a handful of faces in the audience. In contrast, at NALAA's 1995 annual convention in San Jose, a large room was packed with over 60 representatives of LAAs interested in developing folk arts programs. In response to the interests of the local arts field, the 1996 NALAA convention will offer the largest number of sessions and events related to folk arts ever offered at a NALAA convention.

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A strong network of state folk arts programs still thrives — in fact, the programs in Nevada, New Jersey and several other states have grown substantially during the past few years. State folk arts programs in over 40 states continue to provide funding and technical assistance to local arts agencies. A new foundation, The Fund for Folk Culture (funded mainly by the Lila Wallace Foundation), was established in 1991. It provides support to many local projects throughout the country and also regrants funds from the James Irvine Foundation for local projects in California. Other national organizations offering programming and services include the National Council for the Traditional Arts, a producer of performing folk arts tours and the annual National Folk Festival (which moves to Dayton, Ohio, this summer); the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, providing equipment loans, technical assistance, useful publications and a free recorded announcement of employment listings; and the Office of Folklife Programs of the Smithsonian Institution, which presents an annual festival of regional, ethnic and international traditions, produces recordings and offers technical assistance. National Endowment for the Arts support for folk and traditional arts is now provided mainly through the Heritage and Preservation division, which supports (among other things) local activities of national and regional significance. Its next deadline is on March 4.

*The author is grateful to Helen Hubbard Marr, New York State Council on the Arts Folk Arts Program, and Daniel Sheehy, NEA Folk and Traditional Arts Discipline, for their incisive comments about previous versions of this article.*

## LOCAL FOLK ARTS ENHANCE K-12 EDUCATION

By Paddy Bowman, Coordinator, National Task Force on Folk Arts in Education

"I didn't even know what I didn't know," a K-5 music teacher said at the end of a folk arts institute that I directed for teachers this summer. She was summarizing not only the experience of the institute but what she had overlooked in her teaching. Although this teacher grew up singing

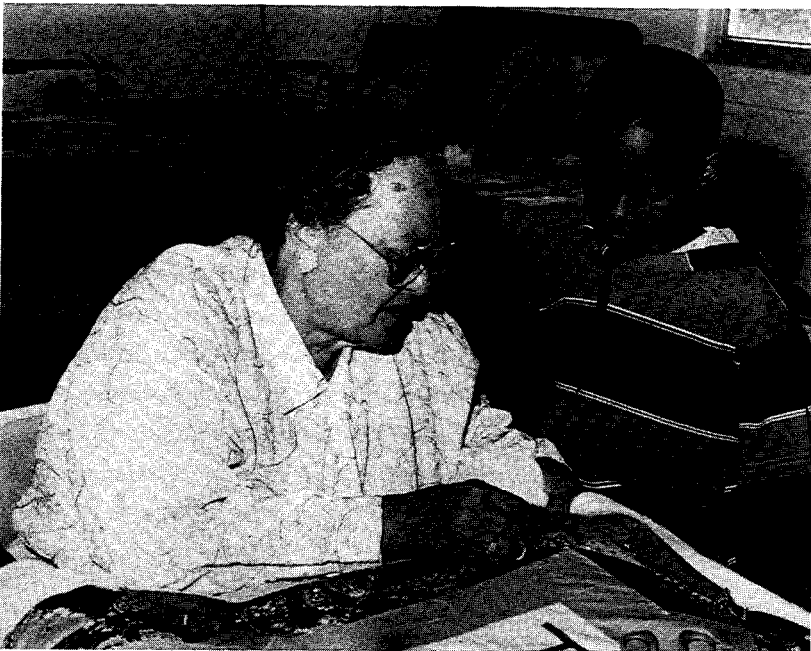
bluegrass and hymns in a West Virginia coal mining community, she had never connected her music education or her teaching with the soundscape of her childhood.

This fall she asked kindergartners to collect the childhood songs of their parents and collaborated with the school visual art specialist and a social studies teacher on a Piedmont blues unit. Students studied color theory with the color blue, viewed a film about Piedmont musicians, painted remarkable works while listening to the blues, and compared Piedmont blues with Delta blues. In spring they plan a residency with the renowned Piedmont bluesman and National Heritage Fellow John Jackson.

What local treasures could enrich your schools?

An arts in education program does not have to look elsewhere for talented artists to inspire children and open their eyes to new ways of learning. Whether they learn from a famous academy or from a grandparent, artists share an ability to shape knowledge uniquely. A dancer who gracefully leaps across the stage and a pysanky artist who intricately paints eggs each demonstrate to children the values of discipline, practice, and learning itself that make these artists' work appear magically effortless.

"Did you like to do this when you first started?" is a question children often ask a folk artist, underscoring children's realization that they might want to learn a similar art but know they have a history of giving up. Artists have not given up, and folk artists are no different from classically trained artists. Like you and like all children, folk artists learn from those around them — family, religious communities, co-workers, friends, elders.



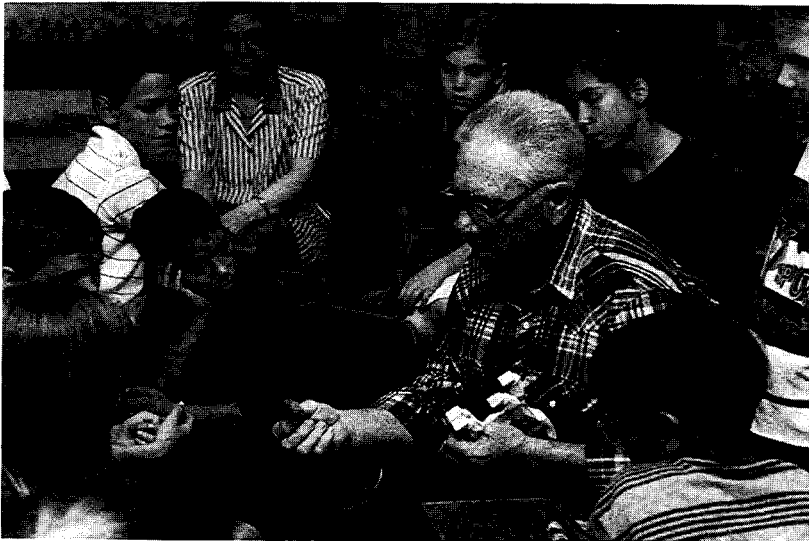
Hystercine Rankin quilting a top made by A.W. Watson Elementary School children in Port Gibson, Mississippi, through Reading for Life.

Photo credit: Patricia Crosby

Much of the emphasis on the current wave of education reform is on connecting with local communities and parents, addressing diversity, and serving the underserved more fully. Yet budget cuts to education, the arts, and cultural institutions accompany this drive for reform. Both trends lend support to the value of exploring the local.

Your local arts agency can offer folk arts in education (FAIE) alternatives in several forms to your local schools:

- Commission fieldwork to identify local arts and artists who can work in schools or other venues;
- Add folklorists' or folk artists' residencies to school rosters;
- Initiate professional development for teachers with folklorists and folk artists;
- Purchase or borrow FAIE curriculum materials for school or other educational programs with partners such as libraries or senior centers (see Resources).



Raymond Cleghorn of Ashdown, Arkansas, discusses wood carving techniques with fourth graders at Winthrop Elementary School, Winthrop, Arkansas. Mr. Cleghorn's visit was held in conjunction with the TRAHC Folklife in Education Project.

*Photo credit: Jan Rosenberg, courtesy of the Texarkana Regional Arts and Humanities Council, Inc.*

Below are sketches of some FAIE projects that local arts agencies have supported around the country.

### **Oregon Folk Arts Program, Portland, Oregon**

Nancy Nusz brought years of FAIE experience to the Oregon Folk Arts Program when she moved from Florida. Nancy has worked with the Oregon Coast Council for the Arts, Eastern Oregon Regional Arts Council, and local schools to produce excellent FAIE materials on maritime and Mexican American folk arts that allow students and teachers to complete units without

a folklorist in residence: a table-top exhibit of art objects, artists' bios, overhead transparencies, student magazines, teacher guides, student-produced video tapes, resources, and a list of local folk artists who can work in the schools. Two lightweight but durable cases allow these materials to move affordably from school to school.

### **Mississippi Cultural Crossroads, Port Gibson, Mississippi**

Mississippi Cultural Crossroads in Port Gibson, Miss., has been instrumental in linking students and folk artists through significant quilting and storytelling projects. Director Patty Crosby found that African American quilters in the region produce dramatic story quilts and she brings quilters to schools to help children quilt their own biographies. She also commissioned fieldwork to identify

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The National Assembly of Local Arts Agencies represents the nation's 3,800 local arts agencies in developing an essential place for the arts in America's communities. It helps member agencies with leadership and professional development, research, information and publications, public policy development and public awareness.

local artists and brought professional storytellers to town to swap tales with and encourage local artists.

**Texarkana Regional Arts and Humanities Council, Texarkana, Arkansas**

The Texarkana Regional Arts and Humanities Council has its own folklife program led by Jan Rosenberg, who has worked in local schools since 1991. Students from grades 4 to 12 have examined the traditional arts and culture of their homes and communities in southwestern Arkansas. Over 1,500 students have identified traditional arts in their own lives and examined the work of regional folk artists.

**Kentucky Folklife Program, Frankfurt, Kentucky**

Bob Gates of the Kentucky Folklife Program has plugged folk arts into that state's significant education reform and is now working to make folk arts surveys and FAIE school programming part of local cultural planning. "Folk artists' voices need to be in the plan," he said, "and we're recommending folk artists as resources for schools."

**Museum of Western Colorado, Grand Junction, Colorado**

Colorado has three folklorists active in education and working with local arts agencies. Ronna Lee Sharpe, Curator of Folklore at the Museum of Western Colorado in Grand Junction, was grateful to work with the late Barbara Conrad, who directed the Durango Art Center. "Barbara was great at getting folk artists into the schools. She matched artists in our master-apprentice tour with appropriate schools and distributed our publication to all the schools." Currently Ronna Lee has cowboy poets working in several regional schools.

**RESOURCES**

**NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:**

**American Folklife Center**, Library of Congress, Washington, DC 20540; 202.707.6590. Folklorists in over 45 state arts agencies and many universities and colleges are invaluable resources for investigating your local folk arts and identifying artists. To find a folklorist, contact the American Folklife Center. Also ask for *A Teacher's Guide to Folklife Resources for K-12 Classrooms*, which lists good materials and state programs. Several of the listed publications are available from City Lore (see below).

**City Lore**, 72 E. First St., New York, NY 10003; 212.529.1955, is a great source for educators' materials in the new *Culture Catalog*.

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927 15th Street, N.W.  
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Washington, DC 20005  
tel 202.371.2830  
fax 202.371.0424

**The Fund for Folk Culture**, P.O. Box 1566, Santa Fe, NM 87504; 505.984.2534

**Heritage and Preservation Division**, National Endowment for the Arts, 1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20506; 202.682.5428. The National Endowment for the Arts designates several National Heritage Fellows annually. These highly gifted artists from all over the country are excellent candidates for school and community programs. For a list of Fellows, contact the Heritage and Preservation Division.

**National Council for the Traditional Arts**, 1320 Fenwick Lane, Suite 200, Silver Spring, MD 20910; 301.565.0654

**National Task Force on Folk Arts in Education**, 609 Johnston Pl., Alexandria, VA 22301-2511; 703.836.7499 can tell you about model projects and materials and teacher institutes. The Task Force advocates for the inclusion of folk arts and artists in the nation's education.

**Office of Folklife Programs**, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560; 202.287.3424

**PROFILED ORGANIZATIONS:**

**Fresno Arts Council**, 2425 Fresno St., Room 102, Fresno, CA 93421; 209.237.9815; contact: Amy Kitchener.

**Oregon Folk Arts Program of the Oregon Historical Society**, 1200 S.W. Park Ave., Portland, OR 97205; 503.222.1741; contact: Nancy Nusz.

**Maine Arts Commission**, 55 Capitol St., State House Station 25, Augusta, ME 04333; 207.289.2724; contact: Kathleen Mundell.

**Museum of Arts and Archeology, University of Missouri-Columbia**, 1 Pickard Hall, Columbia, MO 65211; 314.882.6296; contact: Dana Everts-Boehm.

**Rensselaer County Council on the Arts**, 189 Second St., Troy, NY 12180-4496; 518.273.0552; contact: Mary Zwolinski.

**Mississippi Cultural Crossroads**, 507 Market St., Port Gibson, MS, 39150; 601.437.8905

**TRAHC**, P.O. Box 1171, Texarkana, AR 75504; 903.792.8681

**Kentucky Folklife Program**, Box H, Frankfurt, KY 40602-2108; 502.564.3016

**Museum of Western Colorado**, P.O. Box 2000-5020, Grand Junction, CO 81502-5020, 970.434.9814 ▼

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