

Quilts, Regionalism, and Collaborations in Folklore Scholarship

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Several pivotal episodes set the course of my activities as a public folklorist. The first occurred in graduate school when an art history professor ridiculed a proposal to focus on my family's quiltmaking traditions as a topic for serious inquiry. I dropped the class. His sexist, elitist stance ignited my determination to research and write about quiltmaking and to find ways of presenting that information to both scholarly and public audiences.

Other episodes were experienced jointly with my husband, C. Kurt Dewhurst, and they deeply affected what we have done singly and together in the realm of public folklore. Perhaps the most pivotal event was when we saw the 1974 exhibition "The Flowering of American Folk Art 1776–1876" at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. During the twelve-hour car ride back to Michigan we heatedly discussed why there were no Michigan items in the exhibit and why this major exhibit was so limited in its representation of regions and genres. By the time we arrived home we were determined to survey and document Michigan traditions and to present an exhibition of Michigan folk arts. Fortunately for us, the Folk Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts had just been created. We received one of its first grants, initiating the first exhibit of Michigan folk arts and what has become a multi-faceted Michigan traditional arts program. In both situations, there was an absence of scholarship on the traditional arts which directly affected the capacity to include the topic in either academic instruction or in museum public display.

These episodes deepened our commitment to the study and presentation of traditional arts. Other experiences which strengthened and shaped this commitment involved the development of partnerships and collaborations—with other professional colleagues, with other institutional and organizational partners, and with members of the communities whose traditions we've studied and showcased.

Some of the best of our work has been accomplished during these collaborations, and we plan to continue this practice in future projects. Even when partnerships have been frail or difficult, we believe they have fostered innovative research methods, stimulated cross-cultural and interdisciplinary activity, created atmospheres of constant evaluation, brought new voices into folklore scholarship and presentation, and, perhaps most importantly, engendered deep, complex, and lasting personal and professional relationships.

Twenty-three years and many traditional arts public programs and exhibitions later, we experienced another pivotal moment, again in New York City. As we

stood in the galleries of the National Museum of the American Indian at the opening of our curated exhibition “To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions,” we overheard the pleased comments of many visitors, both Native and non-Native, as they viewed the exhibit. Days later, *The New York Times* ran a major article on the exhibit. “To Honor and Comfort” is now traveling to major museum venues across the country, with a smaller version traveling to tribal museums and cultural centers. Needless to say, it has given us great pleasure to know that our goal of documenting and bringing quiltmaking and regional traditions to a wider public is indeed being achieved.

Transcending Differences and Celebrating Achievements: Folklore as a Conduit of Understanding

Alf H. Walle III, SUNY Geneseo

Alf Walle, my grandfather, immigrated to the United States in 1905. After falling in love with Margaret Petersen, he abandoned plans to return to his native Norway. My grandfather had training as a blacksmith, and, after mastering the basics of his craft, he apprenticed as a carriage maker. But fate was cruel, and just as he mastered the subtleties of carriage making, the automobile emerged as the standard of personal transportation.

An immigrant craftsman with a heavy accent and skills out of step with the modern world, my grandfather provided for his family using his knowledge of metallurgy in generic ways, employing none of his artistic sensibilities. Nevertheless, as an avocation, he always maintained a fully functioning blacksmith shop, and he wiled away his leisure hours producing a variety of artistic products (chandeliers, candlesticks, and an occasional utility trailer).

My maternal great-uncle was a man named Maurice La Claire, a professional portrait photographer. Due to his personal interest, La Claire ventured through the countryside of rural Michigan photographing what professional folklorists call “traditional craftspeople.” My uncle had no training in folklore, but he did have a great deal of respect for what we call “the folk arts.” His portraits of craftspeople did not have a political bent (like the photographs of Walker Evans or Dorothea Lange), and even though he did use the technology of the photograph to do so, his portraits did convey a sense of humanity along with a reverence for what was being lost as mass, technological culture entrenched itself throughout our country.

Learning that my grandfather was a practicing blacksmith, La Claire wanted to photograph him at work in his shop. Arrangements were made to bring the two of them together. My grandfather was flattered and quickly accepted the offer.