

Folklore versus fakelore



Al Schaben/DN

Gwen Meister, the folk arts coordinator for the Nebraska Arts Council, has spent the last year collecting examples of Nebraska folk arts.

Public misconceptions about traditional arts may lead to lost heritage

By Kristin Karnopp

When Gwen Meister began her search for Nebraska folk artists about a year ago, she wasn't sure what her quest would uncover.

She discovered that Nebraska is full of living, cultural traditions.

From Albert Fahlbusch's polka melodies in Scottsbluff to the street-corner rap of children in Omaha, from a double wedding ring quilt pattern to a recipe for homemade bread that a mother has passed down to her daughter, folk arts are very much alive in Nebraska.

As the folk arts coordinator for the Nebraska Arts Council, Meister is working to put together a folk arts program for Nebraska. Nearly 40 states already have such a program, she said.

In the year that Meister has spent researching folklore and folk arts in Nebraska, she has travelled across the state interviewing folk artists, Indian tribes, ethnic organizations, rural cooperative extension services and other groups.

But while folk art and folklore is alive, she said, many Nebraskans are unaware or have little understanding of these traditions.

"It's important for people to understand and honor traditional craftsmen," she said. "Their work represents more than what they are doing — it represents a way of life."

Folk art is representative of the values of some group or culture, she said, and is linked to how members of a group live, their view of the world and their religious beliefs.

Lynne Ireland, museum director for the Nebraska State Historical Society, said a community usually claims a sort of ownership of its folk artists.

"(Folk artists) are valuable cultural resources, not only from the skills they have, but also from the kind of communal creativity funneling down into them," she said.

A community plays an important role in passing on its traditions to folk artists.

Meister said folk artists learned their craft through informal ways. They are taught one on one, or learn by watching someone in their family or community.

"People don't go to school to get a bachelor's degree in folk arts," she said.

And folk arts do change, she said, but they change slowly in a way that stays within tradition — like a quilt pattern that changes a little each time it is passed down to the next generation.

"(Folk art) has some sort of continuity of tradition," Ireland said.

Although folk art helps to preserve a people's heritage, the artists who keep those traditions alive often are not honored or respected; instead, they are exploited.

Meister said she was concerned about the exploitation of folk artists — so concerned that she has talked to folk arts coordinators in other states to see how their programs are set up to protect artists from exploitation.

"There are a lot of ethical questions," she said.

In some cases, she said, folk artists are naive when it comes to selling their goods. Dealers can take advantage of folk artists because they don't realize the value of their work.

Unscrupulous buyers may snatch up everything folk artists have, she said, pay a small price for their work and then resell it for a large profit.

Indian tribes are especially vulnerable to exploitation from dishonest dealers, Meister said, because many of the goods that are labeled as "Native-American made" actually are shipped in from Hong Kong or Mexico.

Tribal craftsmen are worried about imposter wares, she said. They want to maintain a good market for the things they make.

But Ireland said exploitation of folk artists was not as much of a problem in Nebraska as it was in other states.

"There are no large art galleries here," she said. "(Exploitation) occurs where there is money to be made."

Roger Welsch, a Nebraska folklorist, agreed.

"I don't think (folk) artists are going to be exploited," Welsch said. "Nobody knows where they are, and they're not all that interesting once they usually find them."

For example, Welsch said, Al Fahlbusch of Scottsbluff is one of the best hammered dulcimer players in the United States. He won a National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellowship Award in 1984 for playing the dulcimer, a musical instrument with metal strings, which are struck with two small hammers.

"In Scottsbluff, I suspect nobody has the foggiest notion of who (Fahlbusch) is. He drives a cement truck."

However, Meister said, some folk artists do become well known for their craft. Losing their obscurity means they also may lose their privacy, she said.

"Many artists are shy, and they don't

want to be bothered by tourists who are always dropping by," she said. "They're not ready for fame."

The public must make folk artists feel comfortable, she said, especially artists who perform.

To help accomplish this, many folk art program sponsors have someone who interprets an artist's performance for the audience, she said, "so (audience members) won't sit there and go, 'Oh, that's really weird.'"

For example, audiences often don't understand the meaning behind a American Indian dance, she said. All they see is a lot of drumming and noise; an interpreter helps them see more.

The public's misunderstanding of folk art has a flip side — many artists who claim to be folk artists are not, adding to the misperception.

"There are always going to be people who aren't really folk artists, but are revivalists," Meister said. "They're attracted to things that are old-timey, not what they learned traditionally."

Welsch has a simpler word for revivalism — fakelore. Unlike folklore, he said, fakelore has nothing to do with tradition.

"I'm really worried that what is very often presented as folklore has nothing to do with folklore," he said.

"(Fakelore) is people dressing up in funny clothes and giving a vision of pioneer life, which simply is fraudulent.

"You'll never go to a festival without some woman wearing a sun bonnet and running a spinning wheel," Welsch said, although spinning and weaving usually did not happen in Nebraska.

"The reason you find all these spinning wheels around Nebraska is that they weren't worn out," he said.

"What the hell were they gonna spin out here? There was very little wool. You could buy cloth at the local Sears store for godsakes.

"Why would some woman sit there making thread when she could go and buy it?"

"It's just wackiness, but in a way, it's interesting because this is what people think."

The public has a tainted perception of folklore, Welsch said, and revivalism, or living history, adds to the confusion.

However, Meister said, revivalists do fulfil a purpose — they help people relive the past.

"There is room for that," she said. "But (revivalists) shouldn't be confused with traditional arts."

People unfamiliar with folk art want an easy way to identify it, Ireland said —

"some sort of acid test to distinguish it from popular culture."

But a distinction between folklore and popular culture doesn't always exist, Ireland said.

For example, she said, the cornhusk dolls that are sold at many craft shows are folk art, but they have become popular too.

Looking at popular culture may be the way to discover what America really is about, Welsch said.

"When was the last time you danced at a German-Russian wedding to a hammered dulcimer player?" he said. "It's much more likely that the last wedding you were at, they had a disc jockey."

Ireland compared popular culture to a river that breaks off into little streams such as folk or traditional culture.

The river is growing larger as popular culture becomes more homogenous, she said, making it difficult for some folk traditions to take root.

"Folk art won't dry up, but it may eventually meander back to join the river."

Popular culture competes with local, traditional culture, Ireland said, and young people tend to measure the value of their community by how closely it conforms to mass culture.

But folk culture and popular culture can complement each other as well.

"A kid can have a great love for Beverly Hills 90210, but can also appreciate going to a German-Russian wedding dance."

But future generations may not have the opportunity to dance the Dutch Hop at a wedding because many folk traditions are not being passed down to young people.

"Folk arts express a lot of things about Nebraska that are important," Meister said. "I'm concerned that some of these (traditions) are dying out."

To preserve folk traditions, young people must become more involved, she said. Some states have apprenticeship programs that pay folk artists to teach their crafts to young people.

And new traditions are always being born, she said.

For example, she said, the rap on street corners by urban children — "that's folk art."

As long as a group or culture maintains a strong sense of identity, Ireland said, members of the group are going to express their traditions through artistic means.

"Folklore is very, very strong," Welsch said. "It will never fade away."