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Missouri Regional Cuisines Project: Mississippi Hills Region

Introduction: Phase One Cultural Inventory and Methodology

As a folklorist with a specialty studying food and culture, and developing programs linking the two to contribute to local and regional economic development, I spent one ethnographic research trip of 11 days in the Mississippi Hills region of Missouri in mid-March 2004. My services were contracted by the University of Missouri/Columbia to conduct a phase one cultural inventory as part of the project, "Marketing Missouri Wine and Specialty Food Products Through Labeling for Regional Identity." Fieldwork was coordinated by the project's primary investigator, Elizabeth Barham of the department of rural sociology at the University of Missouri/Columbia, and in consultation with Lisa Higgins, director, and Deborah Bailey, folk arts specialist, respectively, of the Missouri Folk Arts Program. Carol Fulkerson provided logistical and administrative assistance through Dr. Barham's office.

One goal of the Missouri Regional Cuisines Project, as the project came to be called, is to draw on the Mississippi Hills area's rich array of food traditions, producers, and others involved in local culture and history to develop and expand economic development and reinforce the region as a contributor to the state's economy. The region already identifies itself as "Missouri's New Wine Country" and, as I later saw, there are fairly strong visual reinforcements of that identity. (For instance, there is a "Winery Country" sign at exit 150 on Interstate 55 [I-55], signs at the town boundaries of and throughout Ste. Genevieve, and signs near each local winery. Also on I-55 between Perryville and Ozora are signs for the Crown Valley Winery and a billboard for the Ozora Country Store [and gas station], with a tag reading "featuring Ste. Genevieve County wines.")

Before starting actual research in the region, the scope of work was defined through email correspondence and telephone conferences with project personnel at the university to focus, in part (as described in the grant proposal to the Missouri Department of Agriculture's Grape and Wine Program) on "such things as specialty products produced in the region that are sold, or could be sold, in regional winery gift shops and restaurants (specialty cheeses, meats, jams and jellies, etc.); regional heirloom fruits and vegetables still in production, or that could be produced; [and] local cultural cuisines and specialty dishes."

To that end, I undertook a cultural inventory of what we folklorists call foodways—specifically looking for (and at) the role of food in the history and culture of the Mississippi Hills area, and how those foodways have helped to shape a strong regional identity and sense of place for people and products over time. Examples of local foodways for which I was looking included family farms and community settlements; historic and contemporary crops; recipes; markets; food in the landscape (fields, orchards, farm buildings, signs for farm stands, public suppers, local and farmers markets); social/agricultural organizations (4-H, Grange, extension services); traditional ways of preparing and using various ingredients along with implements, tools, and techniques; and the legends, stories, anecdotes, and cultural exchanges that have become part of the area's folklore and folklife.

My work included brief documentary research on local history, photographing representative aspects of the

landscape and material culture of the study region, identifying resource people, and compiling and/or following up as many leads as time permitted. I identified many tradition-bearers and undertook recorded and unrecorded interviews with a representative array of people, both by genre and by geography within the region. The results of this work form the bulk of this report.

The Mississippi Hills Region: A Brief Overview

The Mississippi Hills area was built on salt and boasts the first permanent settlement [Ste. Genevieve] west of the Mississippi River. The region is, for fieldwork purposes, a loosely-defined ecological--rather than geographic--area along the Mississippi River roughly from Festus in the north to Benton in the south, excluding the town of Cape Girardeau. I worked from ecological maps provided by the project, while constantly consulting topographical maps and generally reading the landscape. The area straddles portions of five counties—southern Jefferson, much of Ste. Genevieve, eastern St. Francois, eastern and southwestern Perry, eastern Cape Girardeau, and northern Scott—and follows Highway 61 to the east and both sides of Interstate 55 to the west. In 11 days' fieldwork, I covered exactly 1,211 miles, including arriving to/leaving from the St. Louis airport and one trip to Columbia to meet with project personnel.

Highway 61 cuts through much of the area and was the organizational focus, from which I set out north, south, east, or west of that road each day. According to local sources, Highway 61 generally follows an old Indian trail that became, after European colonization, the Kings Highway (Rue Royale or Le Chemin due Roi) and, in Spanish times, El Camino Real. The road was also the area's first major postal and telegraph route.

Initial impressions of the study region included the dominant presence of the railroad—tracks, train whistles, and crossings--and limestone and marble quarries, as well as the relatively flat landscape bordered by rolling hills that helped define the ecological area. Logging trucks constantly roll along major roads, and the I-55 corridor is the principal link between St. Louis, the Bootheel, and Memphis. It was apparent the few times I drove on I-55 that the Mississippi Hills area is extremely vulnerable due to the commercial and residential sprawl along the I-55 corridor, which includes existing development and signs of future development.

Working farms, paddocks, and pastures dot the landscape, as they apparently have for the last century and a half. There are many kinds of barns that have a strong visual presence, especially German bank barns like those found in eastern Pennsylvania. Most older residential structures are brick, although clay began to appear quite frequently south of Ste. Genevieve. It is said that the building styles and materials are “French wood” and “German brick.” Wooden birdhouses on poles were prevalent in Perry County, and there were even gourd houses, like those in the Deep South, and at least one dovecote. The birdhouses are primarily for martins, which eat mosquitoes. Scott County also had orchards and watermelons, which were not visibly present further north.

Outside of towns like Ste. Genevieve (population 4,411) and Perryville (7,000), town populations (usually posted on signs at town boundaries) ranged from 82 to 309. Ste. Genevieve, Perryville, and Cape Girardeau offer accommodation, food, and other services to visitors, but there appear to be few commercial service centers for residents (major shopping, banking, professional and medical services) except in the larger metropolitan areas.

Sense of place seems to be more town- and village-oriented, rather than defined by the natural and cultural attractions of the area generally, despite the presence of scenic posted routes such as the Mississippi River Trail bicycle trail, the Ste. Genevieve-MODOC ferry across the river, and several state parks. By contrast, the Ste. Genevieve post office has a 1942 WPA [Works Progress Administration] mural depicting the French Guignolé social dance tradition, and several murals on downtown streets with historic French food and music traditions.

Despite the strong French historical identity of Ste. Genevieve, in particular, the ethnic heritage of most residents in the region is German, as are place names, land use patterns, and much of the cuisine. It was

particularly interesting to a folklorist from away to be in the study region during the bicentennial of the Louisiana Purchase, although there were no obvious local celebrations or any visible marking of the event to commemorate the March 1804 formal transfer of Upper Louisiana to the United States at St. Louis.

There is little visual evidence—signs, place names, names on commercial establishments--of cultural diversity beyond French and German heritage. The Native population's tribal government is on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River and I saw no contemporary evidence of Native traditions, except in legends and some place names. Even in the Scott County portion of the region, there was little evidence of African-American or other cultural diversity, although people talked about African-Americans, especially, fishing for catfish on the river.

There is a strong presence of primarily Catholic and Lutheran churches, schools, and shrines. The Catholic churches were historically French and German. In Scott County, again, the story was different, with a mix of mainline and evangelical Protestant denominations, and almost no visible parochial schools or shrines. There were various temporary signs for religious revivals, and numerous Marian shrines in the front yards of houses throughout the area.

There are also many fraternal organizations in the region--Knights of Columbus; Freemasons, including the Saline Lodge in St. Mary's; Elks and Eagles--as well as military and veterans organizations such as the American Legion and AmVets. Many of these groups sponsor fish fries and other community dinners, which are sign-posted along roads and in shop windows, and advertised in local newspapers.

There are many "firsts" in the region's history and folklore. Perhaps the best-known fact is that Ste. Genevieve is the oldest permanent settlement in the state, and was the first permanent settlement west of the Mississippi long before statehood. Less well-known generally, but part of local legend, is that a piece of marble from Ozora supports the Declaration of Independence in the National Archives in Washington, DC. Historically the area boasted a patent medicine, "Boschee's German Syrup"; 1927 was the "wettest year on record," which caused a major flood along the Mississippi; and the site of the last execution by hanging in Missouri (on February 26, 1937) was on a Ste. Genevieve County farm.

It is said in Ste. Genevieve that summer begins with the "Muny Band's" first concert and the Felix Vallé state historical site hosting storytelling, gavottes and rondos, and serving lemonade and Madeleines. This is but a sampling of foodways and folklife themes in the Mississippi Hills region that follows. Slide photographs record the landscape and material culture, along with supplementary materials including cookbooks, brochures, newspapers, and other ephemera that I collected, and items that people provided during interviews.

The Mississippi Hills Region: A Brief History (with Food Connections)

The Mississippi Hills area was built on salt and boasts the first permanent settlement west of the Mississippi River. Missouri's first industry was the Saline Creek salt works. Artifacts from the salt works are in the Ste. Genevieve Museum, along with prehistoric and historic Indian relics.

Sainte Genevieve (Ste. Genevieve or Ste. Gen)

Ste. Genevieve, on the west bank of the Mississippi River 60 miles south of St. Louis, is clearly the center of the Mississippi Hills region. Founded in 1735, it is the oldest permanent settlement in the state and was the first permanent settlement west of the Mississippi. It was established after the French founded New Orleans, and many early residents had French and/or French-Canadian roots.

Notable houses with food and garden connections include the Bolduc House, a National Historic Landmark built in 1770 and moved to its current site in 1784. The house is considered to be the first, most authentically restored French Creole house in the United States. It includes 18th-century furnishings and stockade fence, and a

“frontier kitchen,” 18th-century culinary and medicinal herb gardens, and a grape arbor. There are plans to start an historic garden to be run by the Colonial Dames. Located at 125 S. Main St.; 573-883-3105. The Bolduc-LeMeilleur House was built in 1820 and features a combination of French and American influences. It also has a vintage herb and scented garden from the early 19th century. Located at 123 S. Main St.; 573-883-3105. Maison Guibourd Vallé House was built by a pioneer French settler in 1806. It features poteaux-sur-sol (vertical log) construction and most of its original framing had a Norman truss and hand-hewn oak beams. The rear garden has an old stone well and rose garden. Located at One N. Fourth St.; 573-883-7544.

Perryville

Perryville, the county seat of Perry County, was incorporated in 1837. Its prosperity came with the building of the Perryville, Chester, and Ste. Genevieve Railroad. The town still has an industrial base. There are many firsts that Perryville commemorates: first telephone (1893); first “horseless carriage” (1903), called a “locomobile” by the local paper; first power plant for electricity (1913). The first store (of log construction) by the town’s first merchant Ferdinand Rozier, former grocery partner of John James Audubon, was on the north side of the court house square. St. Mary’s of the Barrens Historic District is also on the National Register. It was settled between 1797 and 1818 by English-speaking descendants of Lord Baltimore’s Maryland Catholics. It was also the location of the first seminary college west of the Mississippi River, and today is the site of the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal.

Appleton Mill

Old Appleton was settled in 1808. It is the site of a 170-year old grist mill and dam. It is also noted for its reconstruction of the 1879 Pass Truss Bridge on Highway 61 South. Apple Creek has the Shrine of the Lady of St. Joseph, once a cave and underbrush that’s now a waterfall. Local legend says that the caves were once shelter for the Shawnee Indians. Contact the shrine at 573-788-2341.

Scott County

Scott County is flatter than the region to the north, but Crowley Ridge, near Commerce, provides rolling hills and the only winery—River Ridge Winery—in Southeast Missouri. Commerce was settled in 1790 and has one of the oldest clapboard churches, the Methodist Church built circa 1860, in the county.

Germans were among the first settlers in the county and New Hamburg was one of the first settlements. Schlindler’s Tavern has been known for its hospitality since the 1850s, and the town hosts the Kow Pasture Klassic each spring, a competition to see how far contestants can “putt” a cow patty.

Diebold’s Orchard in Benton, the southernmost reach of the Mississippi Hills area, is known for its orchards and shop with local products. Diebold also hosts an annual Oktoberfest that features apple cider and apple butter.

Foodways Profile of the Mississippi Hills Region

Missouri's nickname, "The Show Me State" is partially associated with food. The expression, "show me," is attributed to comments by Congressman Willard D. Vandiver of Cape Girardeau County in an 1899 address to the Five O'Clock Club in Philadelphia. "I come from a country," he said, "that raises corn, cotton, cockburs, and Democrats. I'm from Missouri and you've got to show me."

The ecological area defined as the Mississippi Hills region is, visually, rolling countryside alongside the flat Mississippi River floodplain. Floods are always a threat to the region, its products, and transportation. The last major flood was 1995, and evidence of its destruction and that of previous floods is part of the local lore in terms of commemorating high-water marks, evacuation routes, unstable infrastructure such as bridges, and those who helped save the area. Ste. Genevieve has a new levee, but settlements like Commerce are still suffering effects of the 1993 flood and will not be restored unless they are safe from future disasters.

Local products in the greater Ste. Genevieve area are beef cattle; "row crops" of beans, wheat, corn; hogs (though in decline), two dairy farms, grapes (200-300 acres, which is considered "significant"); and market produce. There is also a pumpkin farm (in Zell) and one large egg farm. There is no corporate, agribusiness farming in the region, although some producers contract with corporations. Generally, crops are not very diversified and there is little or no organic agriculture, except for the Maharishi Vedic Transcendentalist Institute's commercial greenhouse. Watermelons, white peaches, and pecans are a prominent feature of the Scott County portion of the region. Although individuals fish, especially for catfish from the Mississippi River, I only heard about this and saw no one actually fishing anywhere. Ward's Fish Farm is a commercial hatchery for stocking. Hunting is also an important, often seasonal activity, particularly hunting wild turkey, deer, raccoon, and beavers, and also dove, pheasant, and quail. Deer and other meats are processed for individual hunters into sausages and other products by local meat processors.

According to regional agronomists, fruit is difficult to grow due to fungal diseases. Fruit (except grapes) is not a large crop in the area, nor are herbs. While apples are being reclaimed, and peaches were an historic crop and there remain a few individual peach orchards—especially white peaches in Perry County—they are in the minority. There are no U-Pick berry farms in Ste. Genevieve County, but it is said that there might be blueberries in Perry County, though I only touched on the northern part of the county and did not find any evidence of blueberries.

Germans were the largest single ethnic group to settle in Missouri and evidence of their presence in the Mississippi Hills is the local aesthetic for sweet wine. Homemade wines are prevalent, especially those made with rosehips, Concord grapes, and blackberries. People talked of making wines both as part of their family history and today, but I did not sample any.

Many people have gardens and grapevines in their back yards, and there is a great deal of locally produced jams and jellies at farmers' markets and in local shops.

The local delicacies in Ste. Genevieve are liver dumplings, for sale at Rozier's grocery stores and on the menu at several local restaurants; and "Divinity," a white fluffy French candy/pastry with a pecan on top.

Two food-related expressions and pronunciations caught my attention: saying one needed "to put something on my stomach," for needing to eat, heard in Ste. Genevieve; and pronouncing soda as "sodey," heard at a Perryville gas station. Also, by March 17, the clerk in the Ste. Genevieve post office said her husband had his lettuce in, which was the topic of discussion that day.

More specific details about local foods, foodways, producers, and food-related folklife are in the fieldnotes section later in this report.

CONCLUSIONS

The Mississippi Hills region has a strong sense of place, history, and continuity. This report only begins to document the wealth of foodways and tradition-bearers in the area. Agricultural knowledge and foodways are still very much part of local life and lore, and also visible in the landscape and environment. These foodways are vitally important now, but they also could become the basis for new streams of sustainable economic development.

Interviews, especially with older people, often drew out a feeling of loss for the ways of the old agricultural life with its home-made entertainment, community social events, seasonal recipes and foods, and marking the year through seasonal cycles and celebrations. Others voiced a growing emphasis on looking to the area's past to help shape its future, led particularly by long-established and newer vintners, along with those wanting to develop new products based on local ingredients and materials, and revive or refine traditions and celebrations.

Culture and commerce can exist side by side. Cottage industries tied to homes and farms have always been part of life in rural America and with today's technology, cottage industries can become more viable than ever before, both in the region and beyond. Many products in development draw on the Mississippi Hills' foodways and history, and established outlets for these products already exist in farmers markets and gift shops.

This mix of past and present helps to maintain community and communicate a strong sense of place for residents and visitors alike. Living cultural traditions preserve the richness and variety of the heritage of a place and form the basis for planning and building for the future. Historic farms, fields, and pastures, along with newer vineyards and wineries' visitor centers, are very much present on the landscape. They exist side by side and exemplify how the Mississippi Hills area has developed over time. The landscape can be a critical factor in how the region seeks to reinvent itself in a post-industrial culture. Given its vulnerability due to sprawl and other development along the I-55 corridor, however, this suggests that this area needs to consider a cohesive master plan very soon.

Many people talked about the appeal of the region's history and culture to develop even more tourism, particularly focused on food and wine. This foodways-based travel is a growing segment of the tourism industry generally. Many "tourists" I encountered were first-time travelers to the area for pleasure or business. Others came to visit family and friends. Still others were returning to the place where they grew up and still have ties, or are relocating for business or a different quality of life, especially from places such as St. Louis.

Folklorists and other cultural specialists and enlightened planners call this trend that emphasizes local places and products heritage (or cultural or eco) tourism, which is actually a kind of cultural conservation. Heritage tourism is loosely defined as travel directed towards experiencing the arts, heritage, and special character of a place, and can be targeted both to residents—the be-a-tourist-in-your-own-town approach—as well as visitors from away. This kind of tourism is prompted by all the reasons people leave their homes for a quality--and authentic--experience. It involves eating, drinking, walking, talking, looking, relaxing, shopping, and participating in all the aspects that make people and their places unique.

Food is an ideal way to engage visitors and residents alike, since everyone eats. For residents food was (and is) one of the most lasting of the old country ways, even if those old-country ways are many generations away and only recalled in family stories and recipes. Long after immigrants adapted their clothes, houses, occupations, and maybe even language to American ways, their notions about old-country food and foodways persisted and these enduring foodways are very strong in the Mississippi Hills region. And it could be those foodways that visitors come to experience.

There are many directions this Missouri Cuisines project might take in the Mississippi Hills region. Among a few outcomes that look especially to residents and to tourists that came out of fieldwork are:

- * collaborate with local schools and colleges to establish ongoing oral history projects to document the history and culture of the area, particularly regarding foodways and customs that could be revived or developed for sustainable economic development
- * develop websites, media productions, and publications that document the area's local producers and culture
- * develop a "Taste of the Mississippi Hills" box or fill locally-made baskets with foods and wines unique to the area to sell in gift shops or online
- * develop logos and signs to identify establishments that feature locally-produced products
- * develop cultural tours that highlight local foods, producers, history, and natural features
- * establish and/or enhance local festivals that celebrate authentic folklife and seasonal events

In summary, folklorists look at food as another kind of archaeology that excavates the life of people and their place over time and space. The future of the Mississippi Hills region may very well lie in its past, showing how its way of life has been adapted and adopted by many forces to symbolize who and what the area was and might become.

Folklife and Tradition-Bearers in the Mississippi Hills

- Interview Notes
- Community Cookbooks
- Fairs and Festivals
- Leads for Future Study and/or Follow-Up
- Traditional Artists
- Bibliography
- Photographic Log and Notes