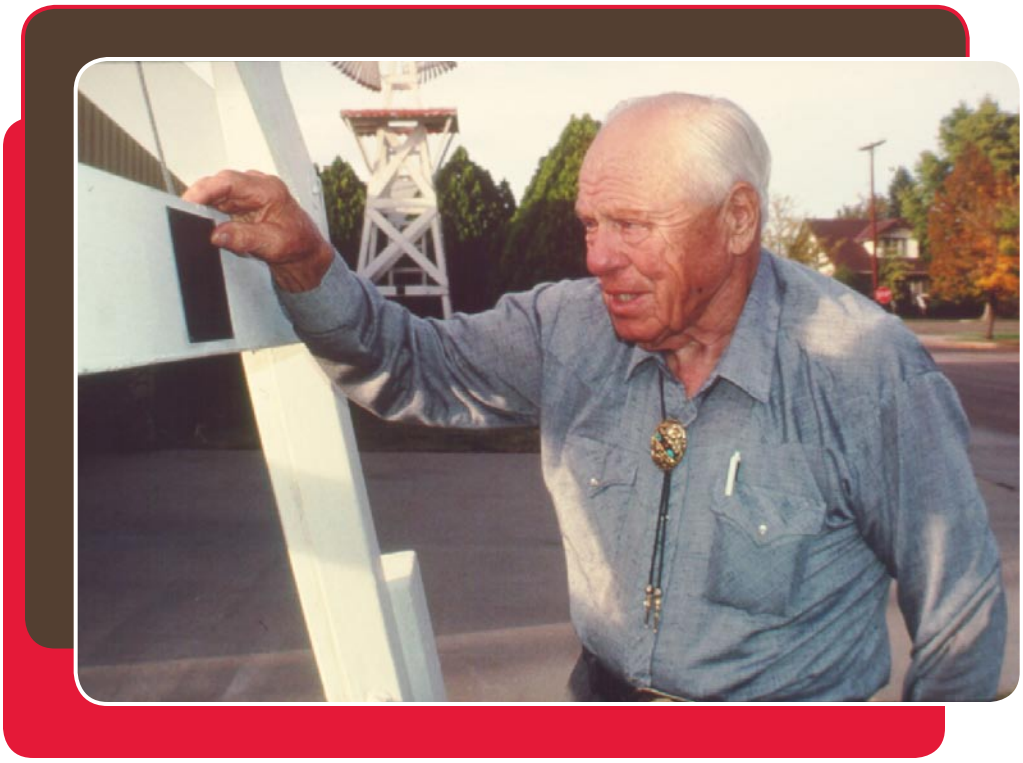

Rhynold Fager of Flagler carefully restores windmills to working order. Photo by Georgia Wier, 1998.

Southeastern Colorado Cultures

This essay samples some of the rich cultural traditions encountered during a nine month long survey of Colorado's southeastern plains. It illustrates many of the ways in which the folk arts can be used literally to get to the heart of the matter. In the author's words, "Individual and community heritage is alive in the folk arts, traditional expressions whose connections to the past and present are ever unfolding in myriad aesthetic forms."

Contents

Look for these Icons for resources accessible on this website

Audio

Video

Lesson Plan

Standards: Information in this essay can be presented to help meet these Colorado Model Content Standards according to various age groups, abilities, and grade levels, depending on the class.

History 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
Geography 2, 3, 4, 5
Music 4, 5
Foreign Language 2
Dance 4, 6

Resources: A wide variety of resources are directly accessible on this website.

- ***Audio and Video*** segments related specifically to this essay showcase Latino Culture, quiltmaking and fiddle traditions (also available in cassette and vhs form from CCA.)
- **Lesson Plans** related specifically to this essay include the following: Wheat Weaving, Latino Cultures, and Quilts Across Cultures

Please see Lesson Plan and Resource Sections to access these resources and notations throughout the essay for ideas!

About the Author

This section was prepared by Laura R. Marcus, a folklorist now living in Santa Fe, New Mexico. For the past few years, Laura has helped refugee and immigrant artists to continue practicing their traditional arts in Portland, Oregon, and has also helped channel funding to folk artists of all types living throughout the West. Laura received her Ph.D. in Folklore from the Indiana University Folklore Institute. Her dissertation examined trading on the Navajo Reservation, past and present, and was based on ethnographic fieldwork and archival research. Her master's degree in Folklore and Anthropology is from the University of Texas at Austin. From August 1996 to March 1997, Laura worked for the Colorado Council on the Arts, conducting an NEA-sponsored folklife survey of Colorado's southeastern plains. As a contracted folklorist for the CCA, she spent nine months surveying and documenting the rich cultural traditions of that area.

Southeastern Colorado Cultures

By Laura Marcus

Introduction

Alongside downtown railroad tracks throughout southeastern Colorado, towering grain elevators gleam against a deep blue sky. Ride the elevator to the top, and look out over the land below. The view conjures images of a crazy quilt spreading out before you: the fields fit together like patches of many shapes and sizes, colors and textures. Just as the fabrics and designs in a quilt reflect memories and personal significance, stitched together with circumstance, so the fields, farms, and towns tell the story of many travelers who have come to the area to make a living from the land (G 5.1) Pioneers from the eastern states, Norwegians, Japanese, Irish, Germans and Russian-Germans, and Mexicans, among others, have brought cultural traditions from their home countries. Individual and community heritage lives in the folk arts, traditional expressions whose connections to the past and present are ever unfolding in myriad aesthetic forms.

Commonly, the folk arts are described as part of a culture's artistic repertoire, passed on informally from generation to generation, gathering ideas and technology from each era. The folk arts are not typically found in galleries. Rather, they are on the backs of horses—handmade saddles with intricate patterns embossed to the liking of the maker and the rider. (See the section on saddle making in the exhibit catalog, Master/Apprentice: Colorado Folk Arts and Artists, 1986-1990 pp. 46.53.) They are found

Field of sunflowers near Cheyenne Wells. Photo by Georgia Wier (NE Colorado CCA Folklorist Collection at City of Greeley Museums).

on the beds of family members—quilts stitched together with thoughtfulness and care, marking the birth of a child, a wedding, a departure from the community, or simply the need to keep warm (Master/Apprentice: Colorado Folk Arts and Artists, 1986-1990 pp. 46-53). Holiday tables are often dressed to the hilt with traditional culinary treasures, whose recipes have been brought to the area and have been handed down through time. In many Hispanic families, homemade tamales are a sign of the Christmas holidays. In one southeastern Colorado town, the local grocery store stocks lutefisk each Christmas for the descendants of a Norwegian settlement. Over this and other holiday foods prepared for the seasons, people gather to visit and reminisce. The taste and smell of time-honored traditions create a memory bridge. (G 5.3)

Wheat Weaving

Some folk arts began or were carried on out of economic necessity. One woman tells of her family's struggles to survive as wheat farmers on the eastern plains. A bad hailstorm could take out a whole crop, and with it a family's hopes for financial stability. The artist reflected, "I knew this wheat had to be good for something besides just losing money." She learned to weave the wheat into pleasing forms, and has helped to keep her family afloat, especially in bad growing years (G 5.3).

Each autumn, the rural artist harvests a small amount of wheat from the family's crop to use for her weaving. As she needs it, she soaks the wheat in water to make it pliant, and then weaves it into different forms. Her self-designed windmills are her trademark. Windmills are a powerful visual symbol throughout the plains, where water has been key to survival (G 2.1, 3.2, 4.2).

This plains artist has also studied the wheat weaving traditions of other cultures and incorporated them into her designs. The Welsh curved fan is a woven figure made in the fall by the first person in a community to harvest their fields. It is hung over the door until the next farmer harvests, and then moved to each successive household in the neighborhood. The last family to harvest keeps it in their house, where it is considered a sign of hope for a good crop in the coming year. Although this is a transplanted symbol, it certainly has bearing on life in southeastern Colorado. The artist often receives special orders from members of the community who desire decorations for weddings or place settings for conference tables. Her talent and dedication are a source of local pride. Traditional materials and techniques, regional themes, and necessity are all woven into her finely made pieces. Explore wheat weaving further in the Wheat Weaving **Lesson Plan**.

Nacimiento Making

In a garage in a small town on the eastern plains, another artist constructs a nacimiento (nativity scene) to illustrate the story of Christmas. Nacimiento making is a folk art that has traveled to this country with Mexican immigrants (H 3.1). At Christmas, nacimientos fill the homes and yards of Mexican-American families, celebrating the season and maintaining a link with the home country (H 6.1). The heart of a nacimiento is a tableau depicting the birth of Christ. Many nacimiento makers create elaborate scenes, and their arrangements reflect individual aesthetics and family traditions.

This nacimiento artist, whose name is José, came to the United States from Mexico in the 1940s to work in Colorado's agricultural industry. Although he always planned to return to Mexico, José has made his home in southeastern Colorado since that time (HS 4.2). His father and grandfather were carpenters in their native village in Mexico, and were often asked to make cabinets and furniture for village residents. Having been trained in this craft since he was a small boy, he has continued this family tradition, and it has provided a livelihood during most of his years in the United States. In addition to the smaller items he learned to make when he was younger, his expertise has involved him in building many a house in southeastern Colorado.

José remembers that his father always made nacimientos throughout his childhood, and he has done the same for his family for the past sixty years. Whereas his father's nacimientos depicted various international cities, José's tableaux portray scenes from the Bible. Each year, he travels to Mexico and buys special ceramic figures that he artfully arranges in his nacimiento scenes. The actual Nacimiento, or Birth of Christ, is at the center of his arrangement, and then on either side his other scenes radiate out to line two sides of his garage, a linear area covering at least forty feet. The Tower of Babel, The Story of Adam and Eve, Moses Parting the Red Sea—these stories are brought to life with hundreds of miniature figures, animals, trees, buildings, pictures, and more (H 6.3).

Several nights preceding Christmas, the nacimiento creator invites the neighborhood to come and enjoy his work, listen to traditional Mexican Christmas music, share cookies and coffee, and visit. It is a holiday festivity enjoyed by many in the community who, like the artist, are eager to uphold the cultural traditions of their homeland. For weeks before he opens the nacimiento to the public, neighbors stop by to check on his progress. The family legacy of carpentry, the cultural tradition of nacimiento making, and the artist's own creativity and cultural pride are all intertwined in his dazzling creations (HS 3.1, 3.2).

Watch and hear the music and dance traditions of several of Colorado's Latino communities. See José L. Baca, his apprentice Mario Medina, and the Mexican-American Matachines dancers from Pueblo. Learn why Oliverio Lara, jarocho harpist, wants to pass his skills on to apprentice Natasha Aragon. Both are on ***Just Plain Art***, a video produced by the Colorado Council on the Arts, in 1994 (Daniel Salazar, videographer).

Hear about Hispanic music traditions from southern Colorado on ***Do Not Pass Me By***—Waltz and verses for newlyweds, from Jenny Baca Koontz on fiddle, and Skully Garcia on guitar {1B1}, Latino music and other cultural traditions from La Familia Manzanares of San Pablo {1A1} and Jacklyn Sanchez of Alamosa {1A2}. ***Do Not Pass Me By*** was originally produced by David Brose and narrated by Harry Tuft as two cassettes filled with radio programs. (Mu 4&5, H 3, FL 2, D 4&6). See Latino Cultures **Lesson Plan**

Quilting

Quilting is a folk art found throughout Colorado's Eastern plains. Some quilters work alone in their own homes, while others gather at quilting bees and guild meetings. Many modern-day quilters own quilts that were made by their grandmothers and great-grandmothers. Often a cherished item hanging on a quilt rack, these quilts may be the only tangible connection to relatives who were left behind back east many years ago. Many quilters can look at a quilt and tell you when it was made by the fabric that was used, especially when it was cut from an old piece of clothing or other family items. Quilt designs may also have historical value. (H 2.2) Those with names like "Texas Dust Storm" evoke historical eras, when quilting was a means of survival on the eastern plains. During the Gulf War, a Desert Storm pattern was created and circulated among quilters. Making such a quilt was a wish for a loved one to return home safely (HS 6.3). "Flower Garden" implies more cheerful images and allows the quilter to use many tiny pieces in this intricate pattern.

Members of the Cheyenne County Cattlewomen's Association offered this quilt for raffle sale at the Cheyenne County Fair in 1999. Each woman used her family's brand as the design for her quilt block. Marilyn Bullock, Yvonne Schallenberger, Alice Keller, and Barbara Jolly stand beside their group's quilt. Photo by Georgia Wier (NE Colorado CCA Folklorist Collection at City of Greeley Museums).

Some say that the Log Cabin design is the most authentic American quilt pattern. Regardless of how the pieced squares are arranged, Log Cabin quilts most often have shades of light and dark, representing the different aspects of life. Lighter fabrics symbolize the happy times in life: births and marriages, while darker ones are equated with difficult life events, such as divorce and death.

Every quilt tells a story of some kind, even if it was made for the sole purpose of keeping warm. One woman gathered all of her mother's old fabrics, buttons, and bric-a-brac to make a butterfly quilt. Taking pictures from the encyclopedia as a model, this quilter made a different butterfly for each square, using her vast assortment of materials to create accurate portrayals. This piece was a tribute to her mother, who had been an excellent seamstress, and to the spirit of resourcefulness her mother embraced. One southeast Colorado quilter received a commemorative quilt from her daughter and granddaughter (also quilters) for her ninetieth birthday. These two took tracings of the hands of all the recipient's descendants and cut them out of different colored fabrics. Various shades of green represented each generation. Embroidered with the names and birth dates of each person, the leaves were stitched onto a large family tree and presented to "the trunk." Another quilter, who was raised on the Eastern plains, was taught as a child to revere trees and growing things as they were so hard to grow in her home environment. She is currently doing a series of quilts full of leaf and tree designs and fabrics as a tribute to her respect for nature.

Such stories abound on Colorado's eastern plains. The folk arts are a valuable window to personal and cultural identity. (G 4.2, H 5.3) They are a powerful medium through which students may access the traditions of other cultures and begin to learn important lessons of tolerance (H 3.1, 3.2).

Folklore is a rich resource through which students can understand their own heritage as they explore expressions of family and community identity. Folklore studies can also be an effective forum from which to interpret current events of regional, national, and even global importance. Through the Colorado Council on the Arts' State Folklore Program, folklorists and folk artists are available to help teachers work these dynamic materials into their curricula.

Find out more about how quilting can fit into your classroom in the Quilting Across Cultures **Lesson Plan**.

For an example of African-American quiltmaking traditions, see "***Just Plain Art***" segment 6.

For an example of a Hmong embroidery folk art tradition alive in Colorado, see the second section of "***Just Plain Art***." (RW 4, VA 4)

Windmill carefully restored to working order and beauty by Rhynold Fager of Flagler. Photo by Georgia Wier (NE Colorado CCA Folklorist Collection at City of Greeley Museums).

Classroom Activities

Family Folklore

Collect family folklore, including stories, recipes, and songs, and compare the results in class. What similar themes emerge between families that help us connect to one another?

Festivals

Attend a local festival and observe which regional folk arts are on display. Consider the following question: how do these art forms contribute to the identity of the community?

Quilt Patterns

Identify twenty quilt patterns and research their meaning. How do the names relate to the history and geography of an area?

Windmills

Look at the world of windmills. Design a scale model to examine windmill technology, while researching how this technology has influenced the history and geography of the region.

Fiddling

The fiddling tradition in the plains of the state has been quite strong, and that folk music tradition exists today. Ties That Bind offers several audio selections available on this website to explore fiddling traditions in Colorado.

Listen to selections from "***A Calling Card for Friendship***"--"Cottonpatch Rag" and "Durango's Hornpipe"--(CCF IIB-1,2) and ***Do Not Pass Me By*** IA-7. (Mu 4&5, H 3)

Fiddler H.L. Hayes of Pueblo, was born in Oklahoma in 1923. His father was a cotton farmer, who often took H.L. to Texas when it was time to sell their crop. Hayes's first musical experiences were as a guitarist. He later learned to perform on the mandolin and settled on the fiddle. During his more than 25 years with the railroad, H.L. worked as a switchman, brakeman, fireman, and conductor.

H.L. takes great pride in his fiddling, and in his own words "plays it different than Texas." As of 1990, there is an emerging national fiddle style that is based on elements of Texas fiddling. This includes the rendering of tunes in a relatively slow-paced fashion, such that the musician-fiddler can fit in many variations of melodic theme and many harmonic intervals.

Hayes, who maintains a highly personal style, continues to perform his renditions of traditional fiddle tunes in a fast "hell bent for leather" style, with a simple guitar accompaniment that is less complex than the Texas back-up style, often referred to as "sock guitar," that features many complex uses of chordal inversions and multiple tonal voicings. H.L. identifies himself as an "old time" fiddler, which represents pride in his link to late 19th century and early 20th century Anglo-American fiddle music. Much of his repertoire is composed of tunes common to the repertoires of old-time Appalachian and Ozark fiddlers, tunes like "Forked Deer," "Ragtime Annie," and "Leather Britches." Others, such as "Black Hawk," are more characteristic of the American southwest and unknown to many fiddlers of certain other fiddling dialect regions of the United States.

"Cottonpatch Rag" and "Durango's Hornpipe" are often performed by H.L. Hayes at jam sessions and fiddle contests. The recordings were made at H.L. Hayes's home in Pueblo one hot summer day in 1983. The guitar accompaniment is played by Bill Beedle, who at the time of these recordings lived in Colorado Springs. Although Hayes often prefers a simple back-up, Beedle's guitar style of chordal accompaniment is highly complex and more aligned to that of Texas than to that of many other Colorado players. It is difficult for the listener to not be dazzled by Beedle's technical expertise at his young age.

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