

**ETHNIC AND TRADITIONAL ART: A STATEWIDE PERSPECTIVE**

**TRADITIONAL ART AND COMMUNITY DYNAMICS**

**IN A RURAL COMMUNITY**

**IN CENTRAL ILLINOIS**

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by

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# TRADITIONAL ART AND COMMUNITY DYNAMICS IN A RURAL COMMUNITY IN CENTRAL ILLINOIS

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. *THE COMMUNITY*

Gibson City, the second largest town in Ford County, is the rural community selected as the central Illinois site for this study that seeks to attain a statewide perspective on ethnic and traditional art. The selection of one community to represent the folklife and culture of rural Illinois was not an easy task. A number of criteria guided the choice. First of all, the central Illinois site for the study was to be populated predominantly by people of English, and Scotch-Irish descent, and secondarily by German-Americans, whose ancestors had come to Illinois (hopefully to this very place) in the 1820s or '30s. Secondly, the community chosen was also to be primarily dependent on agriculture. Therefore, the site was to be a farm town with a population of about 4,500, located in the corn belt north of the Shelbyville Moraine, and not situated near an interstate highway or a large urban area. Also, the community's economy should not rely heavily on industry or non-agricultural commerce.

Without a doubt, Gibson City, Illinois is a community whose way of life is centered on agriculture. In a general way, it meets most of these criteria. The majority of its people are of English and Scotch-Irish stock, with a strong German presence in the small towns and farming communities nearby. However, Euro-Americans did not begin to settle in Ford County until the 1850s. The prairies of northern Illinois were for the most part not touched by the plow until after the mid-point of the 19th century, well after pioneer farmers had begun to develop southern Illinois. Today, life in and around Gibson City is still based primarily on farming. Corn and soybeans are Ford County's most important products. Gibson City is located ten miles from an interstate and can be reached only on state or county roads, so it has not attracted much in the way of industry. Nor is it near a large urban area: Bloomington is 30 miles to the west and Champaign-Urbana 35 miles to the southeast, so not many residents commute to the city for work. Gibson City comes up a bit short in the population criteria set forward by the project directors. According to the 1980 census, there are 3,600 people living in Gibson City, but it was chosen over Paxton, the county seat of Ford County, which has a population of 4,500. Paxton is located on an Interstate highway and is not as strictly agricultural as Gibson City.

The central importance of agriculture is evident in all the media--Chamber of Commerce literature, newspaper stories, billboards, etc.--by which Gibson promotes itself or is interpreted for the outside world. A billboard outside of town juxtaposes a farmscape with an industrial skyline over the motto "Rich Soil - Strong Industry." In fact, of the five industries I know about that have been located in Gibson City, three have to do with processing food products from the crops grown in the Illinois corn belt: they are, Cargill, Central Soya, and a Stokely-Van Camp canning plant that is now closed. There is also a glove factory in town, and the M & W Gear factory, which grew out of a local farmer's practical invention for his tractor.

More important than its role as a center of industry, Gibson City is a market town that offers goods and services to the surrounding farming community. Besides the 3,600 residents of the town, many of whom are retired farmers or people from nearby farms who have taken up service occupations or jobs in the local plants, it is reported that there are an equal number of rural dwellers in a five mile radius around Gibson City, and 5,000 more in the next five-mile concentric zone. The fact that Gibson records a larger volume of sales each year than does its larger neighbor Paxton, and that it has one of the best records for retail sales for towns its size in Illinois, shows that many of the people who live within ten miles of Gibson City come here for shopping. However, with increased prosperity and ease of mobility, more and more people go to the large malls in Champaign and Bloomington to shop, especially for large purchases and Christmas shopping. Another indication of Gibson City's success as a market town is the fact that it is the home of the first McDonald's restaurant to be built in a town of less than 10,000 people. It is currently the smallest community to boast a McDonald's.

### ***1. The Problem of Defining a Rural Community***

The nature of the social and economic life in a rural market town like Gibson City makes it difficult to define the community. Any attempt to draw boundaries to define the community that is Gibson City would be arbitrary and artificial. In one sense, the Gibson City community could be taken to include all of the smaller towns nearby: Derby, Elliot, Melvin, Roberts, and Sibley in Ford County; Anchor, Arrowsmith, Saybrook, and Bellflower in McLean County; and Foosland and Fisher in Champaign County. There are many familial and personal ties that exist between the people of Gibson and people who live in these small towns and the intervening countryside. Yet in spite of these many connections, to call this whole large area as Gibson City, to make the central market town the determining factor of the community's identity, would not accurately reflect many people's own sense of identity. There are probably as many different definitions of the local community as there are people who live within ten miles of Gibson City.

The difficulties encountered in trying to define the boundaries of a rural community present a serious challenge to the field worker whose search is for the effects community dynamics have upon artistic activity. To explore all the pertinent connections between people in Gibson City and those in the outlying rural areas and small towns can easily lead the researcher further and further away from the center and stretch his attention to such a degree that any sort of focus is lost. Thus I adopted two strategies, one geographical and one conceptual, that helped me maintain a focus to my research.

Geographically, I chose two nearby small towns, Melvin and Sibley, and arbitrarily limited my study, for the most part, to the nearly equilateral triangle formed by Gibson City and these two small Ford County villages. This triangle should in no way be thought of as the natural boundaries of a community. Yet the area covered is more representative of rural central Illinois than if I had stayed within the borders of Gibson City itself. Melvin has a population of about 800 and is located on a railroad line about ten miles to the northeast of Gibson. Eight miles west of Melvin and nine miles straight north of Gibson City is Sibley, population 400. Both Melvin and Sibley are farm towns that currently offer minimal but essential services to rural dwellers. Both Melvin and Sibley have sizeable German-American populations, along with a number of residents of English and Scotch-Irish descent.

Conceptually, I found it more helpful to envision the social life of the local community--or network of communities--as a grid of social relationships and not as the clearly bounded life of a closed social group. Each person defines for himself or herself, in negotiation with others, his own sense of belonging to a community or communities. The negotiation of a person's identity in relation to the social whole takes place in day to day interactions with all the others around him or her. The idea of people negotiating their identity is not idle abstraction. It's an ongoing process that happens every time people gather in the local café to drink coffee and visit. A large amount of such socializing is spent discussing and clarifying the identities of residents of the area. People value knowing who someone is related to and married to, where they work and live, where they go to church, who they spend leisure time with, what they did last weekend and what they're planning on doing tonight. A lot of energy is spent in locating people in terms of some sort of mental map of social, economic and geographic interactions. Each individual carries his own mental map, and thus negotiating some sort of agreement is important if such maps are to be useful.

Furthermore, because people spend so much time negotiating identities--mapping out everyone's location (including their own) on a grid of social relationships--there is a degree of cultural uniformity that pervades the grid so that any small portion that is carved out for study can be confidently regarded as representative of the larger expanse. There is, indeed, a day-to-day difference between life in Gibson City and in a small town like Sibley, or in the countryside between the two. Nevertheless, a degree of cultural uniformity to the area can be seen in the landscape these people have shaped out of their shared environment and in the language by which they communicate. Their conversations efficiently express shared attitudes, values, and assumed knowledge based on a shared culture that includes a fairly uniform set of aesthetic norms within which a great variety of personal identities may be expressed in ways meaningful to all in the community.

## **B. HISTORY**

### ***1. Ford County and Gibson City***

Ford County, established in the 1850s, was the last county formed in the state of Illinois. Its unusual shape is due to the fact that the new county was formed of portions taken from Vermillion, Iroquois and Livingston Counties. The first Euro- Americans began to settle in this area in the 1850s. Previously, it had been the home of the Kickapoo Indians. The first whites probably arrived along the old "Ottawa Trail" that led from Danville to Ottawa, Illinois. According to one source, the first part of the county successfully settled by Euro-Americans was Drummer Township in the western part of the County.

Gibson City dates its beginning to 1870 or 71 when James Lott bought land in Drummer Township. He built a house and made plans for a town to be developed on the site. When the new town was incorporated in 1872, it was named Gibson after the maiden name of Lott's wife. 'City' was later added to the name to reduce confusion with the town of Gilson, Illinois. The early population of Gibson was predominantly of English and Scotch-Irish descent. Common family names were Jordan, Hoover, McClure and McKeever. A small number of Germans and Scandinavians also settled in western Ford County, but of these groups, only the Germans have

much of a cultural presence in Gibson City today, and even that is slight. A small community of Afro-Americans settled in the area in the 1870s. They had been hired to come north and work on a large farm north of Gibson. Many of their descendants still reside in Gibson City.

Through the years, Gibson City has served primarily as a market town supporting local agriculture. A number of grain elevators are located in town, on the three railroad lines that run through Gibson City. The three lines intersect just west of downtown, supplying the nickname for the town used by the local Chamber of Commerce, "Star City". To point out the importance of agriculture to the town, one retired farmer told how during harvest time, the line of wagons waiting to deliver grain to the elevators would stretch for a mile or more. His story has it that a local merchant once got upset and complained about the wagons blocking the front of his store. Word of his displeasure passed up and down the line of farmers, and it wasn't too long after the incident that the merchant had to go out of business because the farmers would no longer patronize his store. Most merchants in town knew that their well-being depended on the farmers. Another symbol of the centrality of agriculture in the local way of life is the fact that for years--that is, from about 1900 to WWII--the biggest civic celebration in Gibson City was the annual "Corn Carnival."

Yet besides offering a market for the farmers' goods and supplying him with retail goods and services, Gibson City also sought to bring "culture" to this rural community. Two surviving monuments of this civic activity are the Moyer Public Library and the Chautaugua Pavilion in Moyer Park, also known as North Park. Today the pavilion is used mostly on a first come, first served basis for family picnics and reunions. The only regularly scheduled event held there today are the evening band concerts presented each Thursday in the summer by the high school band. Each band member is paid a nominal fee by the city for their participation. In the early years of this century, Gibson City had an active Chautaugua Association that booked a Chautaugua show for a week or two each summer. People from the town and the surrounding area would rent tents and camp in the park in order to attend the daily and nightly programs. The programs sought to offer the refinements of high culture: inspirational speeches, music, and dramas thought to be of a more wholesome quality than those shown in opera houses and treaters.

Gibson City has maintained its importance as a retail town, and as a market for farmers' produce. The three railroads in town are still busy lines. Cargill and Central Soya are important forces in the local economy, and there are still good opportunities for business owners. The central business district contains a wide variety of prosperous stores of all types. Nearly all are locally owned. But Gibson's importance as a center for 'high' culture has decreased. There are no treaters in town. The Chautaugua Association disbanded, and there is little formal dramatic or musical activity apart from the schools and a music club. Churches, of course, are still an important part of many peoples lives. But for entertainment, many people go to Bloomington or Champaign-Urbana. The cultural life of Gibson City, as reported in The Courier, the local weekly paper, is very similar to that of the surrounding small towns that are each represented in the paper through a column of town news: families, schools, churches, clubs and athletics provide most of the leisure activities for the citizens of Gibson City.

One factor that makes Gibson City the focal point of social activity for the whole surrounding area, including Melvin and Sibley, is the local hospital. Before it was built 30 years ago, the local people went to Bloomington or Champaign for hospital care. The Gibson Hospital

was developed through the efforts of several local businessmen, and it receives continued support from the local community by various means, including a Hospital Auxiliary, which operates largely through the volunteer efforts of local women. All twelve of the local doctors are associated with the Gibson hospital, and it seems that the majority of the people in town, as well as in the surrounding communities, go to these doctors. A few people from the area receive medical and hospital services in Paxton. According to an active member of the Hospital Auxiliary, the boundary between Paxton and Gibson City, in terms of medical care, falls somewhere around Elliot.

## **2. *Melvin***

The community of Melvin was first settled in 1855 when some Nicholson brothers came up from southern Illinois with a thousand peach trees on their hayrack. The orchard they planted didn't survive except in name. More permanent settlers followed a few years later, most of them arriving by means of the "Ottawa Trail." A new township was formed in 1868 and given the name Peach Orchard Township. At first, there were only 17 voters in the new political district.

In 1870, word spread that a railroad was going to be built from Gilman to Springfield and would go through this part of Ford County. Enoch Hunt succeeded in getting the railroad built through a section of his farm. He platted a sixty-five acre section for a town site. It was named Melvin after the President of the Illinois Central Railroad. The first grain elevator was built in 1872, and to this day, the elevator is the most dominant economic factor in the town.

Melvin was settled by people of both German and British descent. Common surnames, showing the two dominant ethnic groups who settled the community, are Arends, Boundy, Buchholz, Dueringer, Shives, Thackeray, and Underwood. At one time there were two Methodist churches in Melvin, one English and one German. A German Lutheran church, a Catholic church, and a Congregational church were also established before 1900. The latter disbanded in 1944, and in 1969 the English and German Methodist churches merged. Today there is also a Pentecostal church in town.

Today, Melvin has less importance as a market town than it did in the past. There are only a few businesses still open on main street: a bank, a post office, a small grocery, a tavern, a barber shop, a service station, and a farm supply store. Melvin does boast its own weekly newspaper, the Ford County Press. Also, it maintains the fairgrounds where, each year, it hosts the Ford County Fair.

## **3. *Sibley***

Sibley's history is unique, due to the fact that the community grew up around a large estate farmed by one man. In 1868, M.L. Sullivant began to acquire 40,000 acres (65 square miles) of land, in what is now the northwest corner of Ford County, where he established a farm and the town of Burr Oak. During his first year, he planted 1,000 acres of corn. By 1871, the number was up to 11,000 acres. In 1877, Michael Sullivant met Hiram Sibley--one of the owners of the Western Union Company--in Chicago and sold him a large amount of land in Ford County. Thus the Sullivant estate and the town of Burr Oak became the Sibley estate and the town of Sibley (the site of the present town is a mile or two west of the original site of Burr Oak). One of

Hiram Sibley's first and most important actions was to build a tile factory to produce the drainage tile by which the swampy land of Ford County and the area was rendered valuable and tillable soil.

The Sibley estate was farmed by a large number of tenant farmers who lived in fairly uniform farmsteads, one to each quarter section, with barns painted red and houses painted Western Union yellow. The yellow houses, though no longer very numerous, are still a conscious part of many Sibleyites' sense of their community's identity. Another factor of life on the Sibley estate that persists in the current collective consciousness is the memory that the tenants all brought their corn crops in to what had been the world's largest ear corn crib. A historical marker near the train station tells of the existence of the crib, which was torn down in 1975. A local woodworker has built several toy models of the engines that ran the corn sheller at the crib.

The Sibley farm was kept intact and operated by Hiram Sibley's estate for 58 years after his death in 1888. In the post-war era, the estate began to be sold off by the Sibley heirs. Today, most farmers in Sibley own at least some of the land they work. According to a historical account written by Hiram Sibley's grandson, technological changes required some "difficult decisions" to be made, and the transition was made to fewer and larger farms--in the sense of the acreage worked by one farmer--and new and larger equipment. The most noticeable change in the town of Sibley was the obsolescence and eventual destruction of the large ear corn crib, as bulk bins became a more efficient means of storage. The site of the old crib is now an empty field.

Another change since the days of the old Sibley estate is the ironic fact that only since the early 1970s has a member of the Sibley family, Hiram's great-great-grandson Thomas, been a full-time resident farmer in the community the family "owned " at one time. The year 1972 saw the birth of the first Sibley, Tom's daughter Erin, ever born in Ford County. Tom Sibley, in the words of the family historian, has developed his own style. His farm buildings are painted navy blue, and he has experimented with raising a buffalo herd.

Sibley, like Melvin, was settled primarily by people of German and English descent. German-Americans probably make up a larger proportion of the population of Sibley than they do in Melvin or Gibson City. (Nearby Anchor is also thought of as having a strong German identity.) Common surnames in Sibley are Brucker, Stroh and Stein. As in Melvin, the German Lutheran and the Methodist churches seem to be the strongest. Sibley, however, is less of a retail town than Melvin. Most of the store fronts on the main street of Sibley are vacant. There is a post office, a tavern, a service station, a garage and the ubiquitous grain elevator. The most important event of the year in Sibley is the annual 4th of July celebration put on through volunteer efforts by the people in town. Many local clubs sponsor booths or activities at the celebration, The highlight of the festivities are the fireworks that are set off on the far side of Sibley Lake. The celebration is thought of as a festival held for the residents of the town, but it attracts several thousand people from the surrounding area.

## C. THE LANDSCAPE

### *1. The Towns*

According to the view offered by a city map, Gibson City is almost a perfect square, 18 blocks from north to south by 12 blocks from east to west. All the streets follow a grid pattern. There almost are no intersections that are not made up of 90° turns. The appearance the city first presented to me was that of an island in a sea of newly plowed fields. The boundaries between town and country are sharp. On three sides, the town is circled by streets and highways, with the buildings of town on only one side of the road, while fields of corn or soybeans run right up to the other edge of the pavement. New commercial developments and housing editions on the south side confuse the border between town and country.

Melvin and Sibley also appear in aerial photographs as nearly perfect squares surrounded by open fields. And all the streets in these towns also form square grids. In both towns, a railroad line forms part of the village limits. The Melvin and Sibley business districts developed on streets that run along the railroad, so their downtowns are at the edge of town, the stores facing the tracks.

Gibson City's business district, on the contrary, is in the geographical center of the city. The triangle formed by three intersecting railroad lines is located just west of the business district. A tower watches over activities at this intersection. Two rays from the "star" formed of railroad lines cut obliquely to the east roughly marking the northern and southern boundaries of the central business district.

The business district in Gibson City is neat and distinctive in appearance. The Chamber of Commerce coordinated a face lift of store fronts about ten years ago, supplying paint and some of the materials with which the shop owners decorated their store fronts at their own expense. Participation in the project was voluntary, but it seems that most store owners took part, for nearly every building downtown is highlighted by dark wood trim on which the store name is painted in orange. Some shop names are formed through the use of pre-fabricated wood, metal or plastic orange letters. The orange and brown motif is pervasive. It also appears on park benches downtown, donated by the Coin Club, an unused "Spittin' and Whittlin' Park" donated by the Junior Women's League, and a large Welcome to Gibson City sign at the intersection of State Roads 47,9 and 54 on the south edge of town, which lists businesses and organizations, erected by the Chamber of Commerce.

Many of the buildings downtown are of brick, with some ornamentation on the facade typical of Victorian period commercial architecture in the Midwest. A number of newer brick buildings have been erected. These are almost devoid of any sort of built-in ornamentation. The domestic architecture of Gibson City includes a number of large Victorian houses, smaller bungalows built at various times, and only a few subdivisions of newer homes. My impression is that there has probably been as much restoration and remodeling done as new home construction in the last twenty years.

The skyline is dominated by grain elevators, especially the large rows of cylinders that make up the Cargill and Central Soya plants. There are also a few elevators that look like they could easily belong in any of the smaller towns around. Plus there are two water towers: one owned by the city and one owned by the M&W Gear plant on the south side.

The architecture and skylines of Melvin and Sibley are generally the same as those of Gibson City, except that neither of the former has a large plant or a water tower dominating the skyline. Also, while there are houses of every age found in each of these small towns, there are no real modern subdivisions in either place. The downtowns of Melvin and Sibley lack the coordinated decorative motif that gives Gibson a distinctive appearance. Both appear in need of a face-lift. Many of the buildings in downtown Melvin and Sibley are vacant.

Architecture in all three towns is ruled by straight lines, right angles and rectangular shapes. Nearly every house sits perfectly centered on its lot. Houses are all bordered by a ring of greenery--shrubs and flowers--broken only where the sidewalks lead up to doorways. Sidewalks and driveways are also ruled by straight lines and right angles. It seems that the only curves to soften this square domain are the occasional round flower beds cut into yards or planted in large round items such as barrels, tractor tires or old kettles.

## ***2. The Countryside***

Farm houses--and the few other non-farm houses in the countryside--and their yards, show much the same aesthetic and periodic variety as do the houses in town. The major exception is that they not are centered on their lots. Farm houses are part of the farmstead, a complex of buildings clustered together on a square space surrounded by fields. When viewed from the road, the house usually sits at one edge of this square cluster and the barn at the opposite side. Many houses face the road, but in the case of some of the older houses, it is not readily clear which side should be considered the front. The square farmstead is accented by the straight lines of tree rows, fences, shrubbery, sidewalks and driveways. These straight lines invariably run perpendicular to the sides of the square.

The traditional farmstead is composed of a house, barn and corncrib, plus a few other out-buildings as needed. Change has recently come to the traditional farmscape, though. The old large wooden barns have been disappearing at a rate that some find alarming. Most often the old barns have been replaced by metal equipment barns. The double-cribbed ear corn cribs, a distinctive feature of the traditional landscape of central Illinois, are also becoming obsolete in use, but they are found much more frequently than old wooden barns. In their place, farmers are using bulk bins, metal cylinders topped by a cone. In the past, a windmill would probably have been the tallest structure on any farmstead. Today, one finds a maze of loading pipes that reach a peak above the bulk bins. Also, in the old days, a weather vane would have stood out above the roof of the barn, crib or house. Today, television antennae are much more noticeable when one gazes skyward.

The fields are also ruled by right angles and straight lines. Most fields are rectangular in shape, butting right up to adjacent rectangular fields. Plowing, planting, cultivating and harvesting are all done in straight parallel lines that cut across the field row by row. When the rows of corn and soybeans break through the surface of the earth in the early summer, it is obvious how ingrained (no pun intended) the straight line and right angle are in the farming culture of central Illinois. These days, fields are plowed right up to the furthest possible edge, whether this be a road, another field, or a natural or man-made barrier. There are no fences between fields, because there are few livestock operations in the area today, and free-ranging livestock are pretty much a thing of the past. There are also few hedge rows left. Nearly every

available square inch of ground is being cultivated, though some voices are heard today promoting the idea of allowing some areas grow wild again in the interest of soil and wildlife conservation.

The county road system, surveyed in accordance with the Northwest Ordinance passed by Congress in 1795, making this part of the Midwest a part of the United States, reinforces the predominance of the square in this landscape. The road system forms a grid. Roads run fairly regularly at one mile intervals (marking off a section, which is a numbered unit in the township). Ford County roads are named according to the mile: therefore, 1100N is eleven miles north, while 625E is six and a quarter miles east. Elsewhere in the Midwest, these numbers refer to the distance-- north or south, east or west--the road lies from the County Seat, but I'm not sure what the point of reference is for the numbering system in Ford County.

Farmsteads in this very flat countryside are spread out so that from the perspective of a 360° panorama, one can see about a half dozen farmsteads from any spot on a county road. In the early days of settlement, a farmer would settle on and work a quarter section, or half of a quarter section (80 acres). In 1935, the average farm in Ford County was from 120 to 160 acres. In 1982, that number had risen to 360 acres. My impression, though, is that most farmers today work a greater number of acres. They may own a half section, or even a whole section, but also rent other farms so that many are working 1,000 acres or more.

## II. AESTHETICS AND ART FORMS

### A. LOCAL AESTHETICS

#### 1. *Art from a Native Perspective*

In trying to understand the collective aesthetics of people in Gibson City, Melvin and Sibley, it is instructive to consider the initial responses I received from the citizens who fielded my queries about artistic activity in their community. My basic fieldwork strategy was to ask about three kinds of things: 1) community-wide celebrations or festivals, 2) artists and artistic events, and 3) traditional artists.

In response to the first query, I usually drew a blank. The first person I talked to in town, a young female clerk at the Eisner's supermarket, told me that "nothing ever happens in Gibson City, it's boring." After a second thought, she became more apologetic, "no, it really is a nice town." But for big festive events, people in Gibson go to fairs like the one at Fisher, or to the 4th of July celebration at Sibley. Further inquiry proved that her answer was right on the mark. For community-wide civic celebrations, one has to look at the smaller towns in the area. In the past, Gibson City has had town fairs and festivals. In the early part of this century they held an annual celebration called the "Corn Carnival." In the 1930s, a fall festival--which may or may not have also been known as the Corn Carnival--was the source of some controversy over the presence of "gambling." I found no report that such a celebration has been held in Gibson since World War II.

Currently, the closest thing to a fair or festival in Gibson City is a big flea market, sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce, held on the main street downtown in July. Most of the vendors are outsiders. According to Mrs. Kimm of the Chamber of Commerce, the flea market is more for antiques and collectibles. People with crafts are not encouraged to participate.

Sales of various kinds are very common in the area. There are more posters and signs in store windows and on public bulletin boards tell of garage sales held by individuals, rummage sales sponsored by organizations, and public estate auctions than of any other kind of event. Sales seem to be as important for the opportunities they provide for social interaction as for economic exchange that takes place. And much of the conversation at restaurants and other gathering spots during the week seems to be about what sales folks attended last weekend, or plan to attend the coming weekend, and what they saw or what they bought.

The responses I received to my second line of inquiry, that about artists and artistic activity in the area, show that in the rural culture of central Illinois, the word 'art' means painting. When asked to identify artists in their community, the local people most readily think of accomplished painters like Jan Noble and Deonna Sauers, and the relatively unknown Leona Moontz, a resident of a local nursing home who took up painting at the age of 81. Deonna Sauers, whose work is better known, represents this class of artist well. She started painting by taking lessons. Her preference is for landscapes, especially those with barns in them, and for winter scenes. She usually paints at home, working from sketches and pictures. Eleanor Gilmour was another painter first identified for me as an artist. She taught art at one of local the schools,

gave painting lessons in her home, and had her own yarn and knitting supply shop, "The Yarn Barn." Mrs. Gilmour passed away early in the summer of 1984.

To some people interviewed, I also mentioned the band concerts held on Thursday evenings in the summer at the Chautaugua pavilion in North Park. They agreed that these concerts can be considered artistic events, though the term 'art' seems to be primarily used locally to refer to the visual arts. A woman working in a city office told me that most art activity in town is connected with the high school. Other than that there is not much art in Gibson City.

In terms of my third line of inquiry, the local definition of art did not seem to help the people I questioned. I usually had to explain what I meant by 'traditional artists,' a term I generally explained by giving examples such as quilting, woodcarving and fiddling. Nearly everyone I questioned along these lines knew of a woman who quilted and of a man who did cabinetry, but not woodcarving. On the one hand, some of the older people remembered fiddlers who have been gone a good while. My initial impression was that locally made music is not an important part of local community life, and so I decided to devote my time to exploring the visual art forms practiced in the area. Also, it seemed that woodworking was often regarded as more of a utilitarian task than an art form, though I was later able to easily find several men who did woodcarving.

The suggestion that quilting is traditional art, on the other hand, struck the right chord with the people I questioned. They could immediately identify it both as an art form, and as something practiced by local folks. The first person in Gibson City I talked to about art, for instance, was an 81 year-old motel owner, Rose Tjarks, who told me about the best quilter she knew: Velcie Stroh of Sibley. Mrs. Tjarks has also done some quilting, but she considers herself less-accomplished than others she knows. She also told me about a woman who does "saw painting." As I found out, Jane Froidcoeur has painting skills and techniques equal to those practiced by better known painters like Deonna Sauers. Mrs. Froidcoeur, however, is not known for her framed canvases, but for her "paintings of rural scenes on saws and other everyday tools and implements. Her work does not seem to have obtained the prestige accorded to the "top" artists in the community.

In the context of discussions about traditional art, I also discovered that, when pressed, some people admitted that something that they like to do, with which they take great care, and which has a creative element, can be considered an art form. Thus Dean Froidcoeur, a farmer, agreed that farming is an art, and Geneva Brinkman, a farmwife from Melvin, readily assented to the assertion that baking is an art.

## ***2. Arts and Crafts: Local Categories***

Art, both traditional and elite, has a well-defined, but not always clearly articulated, place in the cultural world of rural central Illinois. Marge Barry publically displayed a definition of art as "the production of beauty" on a sign placed in the window of the folk art shop she planned to open in down-town Gibson City in the summer of 1984. In order to understand what 'beauty' is locally considered to be, it is also necessary to look the category of crafts and how it relates to art.

Marge Barry amplified her definition for me by distinguishing between art and crafts. On the one hand, Art is substantial, long-lasting, and valuable (as measured in monetary terms). It takes special training and ability to produce art. As an example of art, she brought out a piece of pottery made by her daughter Carol Sanake. A sign, for Mrs. Barry, that Carol is becoming accomplished in her art form is that she has developed her own style in the last few years. Crafts, on the other hand, are very trendy. There is nothing substantial or valuable (monetarily) about crafts. They require no special knowledge or training. As an example, she showed me a knick-knick made of dried flowers, small figurines, and a woven, straw handle. She said there is nothing substantial or lasting about such an object, but "it brightens up the home."

Few people in the community have, like Marge Barry, worked out a articulate philosophy of art. Yet there seems to be a general agreement with her view that the production of art deserves greater esteem than the practice of handicrafts. The categories of arts and crafts, and their close relationship, are defined in various ways through community-based events, such as bazaars and fairs. At bazaars, often referred to as "craft bazaars," arts and crafts are lumped together as one booth distinct from others, such as baked goods, flowers, etc. But at the Ford County Fair at Melvin a distinction is made between the two categories. Textile arts are entered in one department while miscellaneous crafts are entered in another. Both of these definitions of the categories 'art' and 'crafts' are accepted implicitly by the women involved. What is important is not the ideological achievement of a consistent and consensual aesthetic, but the smooth and successful working of traditional events that involve artistic forms.

Bazaars reside in the domain of women's work in rural central Illinois. Most bazaars are organized and sponsored by women's organizations at various churches. Their purpose is to raise money for the church through the sale of handicrafts, food, and other items. The arts and craft booth usually receives the most attention, in terms of organization and preparation, and earns the most money. As all bazaars are held in the fall of the year, there is usually an emphasis placed on the upcoming Christmas season. Christmas decorations are often considered a sub-category of arts and crafts, or they are organizationally given independent status. The cultures aesthetic categories can thus be seen in the organization of cultural events, but the clear definition of categories is subordinated to the goals and purposes of the events, as the following examples show.

As chairperson for the United Methodist Women at the First United Methodist Church in Gibson City, Virginia Jones puts a great deal of effort into planning and organizing the craft items that will made to sell at the fall bazaar. Her articulated strategy is to come up with something new each year. People don't want to see the same things at every bazaar. The kinds of craft ideas she looks for are those simple things that every home uses: "what people want, need, and would buy." She tries to come up with items that are original, in the sense of different, and attractive. They must also be inexpensive, though people will pay more for one-of-a-kind items, so a few bigger, more costly items should also be made available for sale.

In the context of discussing her strategies, Mrs. Jones offered a definition of crafts: "making something out of nothing." This implies the creation of something attractive, different, beautiful, and perhaps even symbolic, out of everyday items not usually thought of as beautiful. Crafts enhance mundane objects; they redeem junk. Yet such items are not necessarily art, for they are still cheap enough that people will buy them at fund-raising events.

Upon being questioned on the difference between arts and crafts, Marilyn Bell, chairperson for the 1984 fall bazaar to be held at the Methodist church in Sibley, admitted that most of the items the women will bring in for the arts and crafts booth should be considered handicrafts. The largest and most valuable item to be sold is a co-operatively produced quilt. Marilyn thinks that the quilt could be considered a work of art, for like art it has a good deal of value and it took a lot of time to make. Nevertheless, quilting is still, in her view, a handicraft that women have passed down through the generations. She seems to imply that, though making a quilt takes a great investment of time, the techniques required are not as demanding as those that must be mastered to create art.

The Ford County Fair provides another example of how a local definition of art is manifested the structure of an event. In the Home Economics Department, the women's division, of the fair, an interesting distinction is made between arts and crafts. There is a separate department called Textiles and Fine Arts, which includes garments, knitted and crocheted items, rugs, quilts, and miscellaneous needlework items. Another co-equal department, officially labeled Miscellaneous, is the department usually referred to as "Crafts." This is where paintings, including everything from oils to folk art, are entered. Also considered part of the crafts section are cross-stitched and embroidered pictures and needlepoint, as well as numerous other types of handicrafts. (To make the situation even more curious, Amateur Photography is also listed in the Fair Book as a class within the Miscellaneous Department. But as the women who run the show think of it--in terms of their division of labor and responsibility-- Photography is an independent department.)

There is no ideational consistency here in the way things are divided up in terms of materials or techniques. What really seems to be the key to the distinction between arts and crafts in this event is tradition. The women in charge don't see the need to question the way things are done. The implicit distinction between arts and crafts is that Textiles and Fine Arts includes art forms that have traditionally been practiced by women in the community, with a few allowances made for updating techniques. The Crafts Department covers the trendy crafts. More changes in the judging categories have to be made every few years. Prize money for each category is awarded from the State of Illinois, so it is necessary to keep the prizes offered up to date with the things people are actually doing. So the women who work in the Home Ec departments request changes from the Fair Board every few years to reflect the kinds of actual and potential entries they know about from experience.

When I asked the chairperson of the Crafts Department why, according to the fair book, painting was considered a craft and quilting a fine art, Ruthella Dueringer could only answer, "it all depends on how you categorize it." She sees no need to restructure the departments and categories. However, if someone else had a good idea, she could work with it. She doesn't consider herself an idea person, but supposes that some changes could be made to make things a little better. However, she does not agree that quilts should be included in the Craft Department: "What I consider a craft is something like you'd make from nothing...Take an egg carton and make something out of it."

Marilyn Gudenrath, Ruthella's co-chairperson, has a similar view. She attempted to define crafts for me by distinguishing them from handiwork, such as quilts and rugs. The latter do not belong in the Crafts Department at the fair, but in the Textile and Fine Arts Department where

they are currently categorized. Crafts use different media to decorate objects. Ironically, what Marilyn seems to be implying is that crafts are purely aesthetic and decorative, while handiwork has functional uses as well.

Upon being asked what the distinction is between arts and crafts--that is, why are quilts in the fine arts department and paintings in the craft department--Geneva Brinkman, co-chair of the Textiles and Fine Arts Department, responded that that's the way it has always been done. Besides quilts, Mrs. Brinkman's department, includes knitted and crocheted items, rugs, table cloths, pillow cases, dresser scarves and wall hangings, as well as all sorts of garments. The official name for the latter, according to the fair book, is "sewing." No official name is given for the former categories. Mrs. Brinkman's term for the fine arts in her department is "fancy work."

### ***3. Aesthetics and Community Identity***

Taking into account all the forms of visual expression implicitly accepted as art, it can be seen that the local aesthetic provides the means for expressing the community's identity. This communal sense of identity is not tied up with the specific location, with any political entities, or ethnicity. Rather, it is a sense of being country folk, of living a rural way of life that differs from other ways of life with which the people are familiar through personal experience and the images presented by the popular media.

The traditional arts, especially quilting, are locally valued as symbols of the rural way of life that these people learned and inherited from the previous generations, especially within the context of the family. This aesthetics of this sense of identity is articulated in phrases like "country primitives" and "the rural look" which are used to describe interior decoration schemes that are currently popular. The fact that "country interiors" have become something of a fad in urban society is taken by some local folks to be a justification of the way of life they have been living all along. The current local revival of interest in the traditional arts is connected to the popularity of this scheme of interior decoration that utilizes antiques along with hand-crafted objects. As to which came first, I would be loathe to hazard a guess. The kinds of art sold at bazaars and entered at the county fair are locally connected with antiques and the notion of "country interiors."

The aesthetic that expresses this collective sense of rural identity goes deeper than its associations with interior decorating trends. According to local artistic practices, it seems to me that the symbol that best expresses the community's identity is the old wooden barn. Representations of barns are the most prevalent artistic motif in the Gibson City area. Paintings of landscapes with old barns are rendered on canvases, old cross-cut saws, signs, and even on vans. At the same time that representations of barns are being created as wooden and counted cross-stitch miniatures, the barns themselves are rapidly disappearing from the landscape.

This most expressive symbol of the community's sense of identity is closely tied up with the past. This doesn't mean that these people are trapped in nostalgia. Rather, they actively espouse a value system that is rooted in a familiar and familial past connected with this place. These values are expressed in symbolically through an artifact that is disappearing as a fact, but not as an image. Artistic representations of the rural scene picture the countryside as it existed when today's older adults were young. Painted farmscapes, especially those specially commissioned to represent the family farm, often contain structures that were no longer standing

when the artist created the scene: thus old windmills, fences, corn cribs, as well as barns, are added to the view recorded by a contemporary photograph. Other pertinent examples include the large, aerial photographs that many retired farmers' homes display of the farmsteads where the family used to live and work; the treasured picture--snapshot or painting--of the old house; and, perhaps the most telling example, Ernie Schroeder's elaborate scale model of the barn, corn crib and farm house where he grew up, which he made shortly after the old barn was torn down. Ernie's confession that he wishes he was still "down on the farm" is a sentiment shared by his wife and many others in the community, including the artists. It's a statement that speaks as much about the community's values as about people's affections.

## ***B. ART FORMS OF RURAL CENTRAL ILLINOIS***

### ***1. Two Domains***

Moving from the perspective of a native to that of an analytic visitor, it becomes readily apparent that the world of art in Ford County has two major divisions, the male and the female. These two domains of art can also be characterized as hard and soft; that is, men work with hard materials and use tools appropriate for shaping hard material, while women work with soft materials using the appropriate tools. More specifically, men create art out of wood and glass, using saws, chisels, and glass cutters; while women produce art out of cloth, thread and paint, using scissors, needles and brushes. Nearly all men's art involves cutting, removing or subtracting as an initial activity, followed in some cases by assembling. In women's art there is some cutting--as in cutting pieces for a quilt--but assembling and overlaying seem to be the primary processes of creation. There are, of course, exceptions to this characterization of male and female spheres of art. Nearly everyone knows a woman who does woodworking or, less often, a man who does quilting; but people generally only know one such person and he or she is regarded as something of an exception.

In one important art form the hard/soft dichotomy does not characterize the difference between male and female artistic activity. Both men and women create sculptures through the assembling of found items, most of which are made of hard materials. Yet even in this case, there is a male/ female difference. Men generally assemble large sculptures that are appropriate for outdoor display; while women create smaller items appropriate for interior, domestic use.

There is another area of artistic activity where the distinction between male and female domains breaks down: that is, what I call yard art. The general pattern for decorating yards involves arrangements of flowers, shrubs and solid objects--some found, some shaped and assembled--set within the more enduring setting consisting of house, sidewalk, road, borders and yard. All of these latter elements require some degree of maintenance, and all of them can be changed, but with a much greater investment of resources than is needed for a change in the former elements. Therefore, it is the manipulation of flowers, shrubs and solid sculptures--artistic embellishments--that comprises the domain of yard art. From the data collected, I cannot make a generalization about whose domain yard this is. I know that both men and women like flowers and gardens, and both men and women work at maintaining their lawn and premises. I would guess that men are generally more responsible for the large, heavy objects that go into yard art.

But the ideas might as easily originate with the women as with the men. There is probably no generally accepted division of labor and responsibility for yard art. In many cases yard art seems to be a shared domain.

## **2. *Women's Art Forms***

The women's art forms explored for this project fall into four general categories: quilting, painting, needle art and crafts. Each of these categories involves constructing, through processes of cutting and assembling, an artistic object out of soft materials. Cooking, canning and baking, all of which also use soft materials, should also be considered feminine art forms in the culture of rural central Illinois. I was not able to devote much time to food art, however, and with some justification. In general cooking, baking and canning do not have the social importance today that they had in the past. The four categories of art listed above, however, are currently experiencing an upsurge of interest. And since the practice of these art forms has a more important place in current cultural activity in the Gibson City area, they have more relevance for a study of the community dynamics of traditional art.

Another category of art that should be mentioned is that of interior decorating. In rural central Illinois, this is generally regarded as a woman's domain. Yet this category could be seen as belonging to another level of activity, so it is not included in this taxonomy of art forms. Art objects belonging to the four categories listed above are created and marketed with interior decoration in mind. As Marge Barry said, crafts are objects of lesser value that are made "to brighten up the home." Over and over again the view was voiced that quilts, folk art, etc. are made to be used--that is, displayed in the home--not stored out of sight as artistic investments (that is, as objects whose worth is ultimately monetary).

Quilting. In many ways, quilting seems to be the most prestigious category of women's art in rural Illinois. This is especially true today because of a growing revival of interest in the form. Quilting's prestige has much to do with its traditional aspect. It is familiar to people and represents a tie with the past. These two ideas work together so that, in paying homage to quilting as an artistic activity, people also pay homage to their elders and ancestors who passed on knowledge of and love for the art. They also passed on finished quilts that are used and cherished by the current generations. Quilting is art valued for its familiarity and closeness.

Painting. Painting is another art form held in high esteem by people in this community. The prestige of this art form is probably due largely to the status that painting holds in Western civilization as the epitome of art. Indeed, in common usage, being 'artistic' often means being able to draw and paint (the graphic arts). Painting also evokes a feeling of fear or awe. Unlike the accessibility of quilting, many people feel they lack the capabilities that painters have: "I could never do that." Many, however, do. And part of the popularity of various forms of "method" painting being marketed by the craft industry is due to the fact that they allow people to participate in the secrets of artistic creation. Painting is art valued because of its unfamiliarity and remoteness.

Needle Art. This category covers a variety of forms in which art is produced by manipulating thread or yarn with some sort of needle. Strictly defined, quilting would belong in this category; but the cultural value accorded to quilting in rural central Illinois demands that it be treated separately. None of the art forms included in this category have the prestige of quilting,

nor are they considered art equal to the creation of framed, painted pictures. It is important to note that some of the forms included in this category are associated with an earlier day-- such as crocheted doilies and dresser scarves, needlepoint, cutwork and embroidered pillow slips--while others are currently more popular. Most of the forms of needle art produced today are produced from kits available through the craft industry: for example, fabric with a embroidery pattern stamped on, latch-hook or cross stitch on plastic canvas with printed instructions or a stamped-on pattern. All crocheting and knitting done by these women, like that done by the women of previous generations who taught them, uses printed instructions. Only some old examples of needlepoint, embroidery and cross-stitch seem to have been done without the aid of a mass-produced pattern.

Crafts. This category includes a miscellany of small objects. Most of the art forms listed in the category of needle art would also be called crafts. The independence of the previous category is based on the fact that all such objects have lasting value. They are often referred to as the "handiwork" or "fancy work" that women have always done. Such items become family heirlooms with some sort of sentimental value connected with the identity of the person who made them. The category of crafts, on the contrary, refers to similar but small items that are of lesser value, such as scissors holders or tea cozies. It is not important whether or not these objects survive beyond their initial few years of "brightening up the home." The category of crafts also includes the more trendy art forms--grapevine wreaths, for example--and objects created out of miscellaneous materials and processes--centerpieces and shelf knick-knacks.

### ***3. Men's Art Forms***

The forms of visual art practiced by men in the area around Gibson City fall into three general categories: woodworking, stained-glass and sculpture. All of these categories utilize hard materials. In two of them, woodworking and stained-glass, cutting is a primary activity that precedes assembling. Cutting is more prevalent in male art forms than in any of the female art forms, even though, for example, cutting out pieces is important in quilting. The need for physical strength in cutting stained-glass was given as one of the reasons why women don't practice that art form.

Woodworking. The category of woodworking can perhaps be thought of as the male counterpart to quilting in the domain of women's art. It has the prestige of familiarity. Men are known for working with their hands in making a living. When their hands turn to artistic creation, wood seems to be the friendliest material. One form of wood art is a purely subtractive process: that is, carving or whittling. In this epitome of male art, an object of beauty is freed from a piece of wood by cutting away the excess. The other categories of woodworking involve both cutting and assembling. These can be classified according to the size and purpose of the object. The making of small objects, such as toys and models, is a different kind of activity from the making of large objects, furniture and cabinetry. The latter sub- category seems to have more prestige, perhaps because it produces objects with more utilitarian value, or perhaps because it can be the basis for productive--that is, bread-winning--work. This sub- category, cabinetry, shades into carpentry, which seems to be thought of as a purely practical, and not artistic, activity. The last sub-category of woodworking involves restoring and refinishing furniture. It is an art form because it is in most cases a leisure time activity. It should be noted that in some

situations, the man's involvement in this activity is subordinated to the woman's role of interior decorating.

Stained-Glass. This is a new art form that has attracted a number of male practitioners in the Gibson City area. At its highest level it involves making objects, such as windows and lamp shades, that have a fairly permanent place in an interior decor. A lower level of stained-glass art includes smaller, less- integral decorations, such as window hangings and Christmas-tree ornaments. At the simplest level, glass art includes making objects like glasses, bells and lamp stands out of bottles.

Sculpture. The sculptures that men in the Gibson City area make are mostly assemblies of found and familiar objects. Often this involves disassembling objects, such as machines, into their constituent parts that are reassembled into creative configurations. Some of the large objects used in yard art are sculptures of this variety. Yard art, in one sense, is itself a type of sculpting using found and familiar objects.

#### **4. Yard Art**

The standard pattern of yard art in the Gibson City area is easy to characterize. There is a fairly small, but consistent, repertoire of items that are used to decorate the outside of one's home. Very few yards feature elaborate displays of yard art. Local history buffs, Glenn and Freeda Speer—he also runs a shoe repair business in an interesting old horse barn—have decorated their front and back yards with a number of antique implements set in the midst of flowers. The most spectacular example of yard art is the large and complex garden Richard Strebeck, Sr. built in front of his salvage yard when he retired and turned the business over to his son. This garden presents an amazing abundance of flowers, whirligigs, ponds, and whimsical found objects. (See Appendix IV.)

Flowers. The most common element in yard art is the use of flowers: in beds and pots, including hanging planters. Midway between the flower bed and the planter are large containers that hold flower beds at a higher elevation. Familiar items from the farm, and in most cases from a past age of farming, are the containers that hold such flower beds: barrels, casks, kettles, and tractor tires (A most interesting use of tires is to scallop the edges to resemble the petals of a flower). Flower beds are places in conventional locations: mixed in with the shrubbery that surrounds the house on all sides (leaving only the entrances without a buffer of greenery), running alongside sidewalks or borders, or flanking the entrances to driveways. Flower beds are usually the only round contours seen in the landscape of the yard. The large flower containers are usually set out toward the edges of the property, or they flank the sidewalk or driveway entrance. Smaller planters are generally located on porches and stoops.

Whirligigs and Birds. This category includes the hand-made objects used to decorate flower beds or placed out in the middle of yards. Plastic fans, wooden birds with bobbing heads, and various other plaster or wooden birds are usually placed in flower beds. Large profiles of cardinals, cut out of plywood, are a prevalent type of bird that appears in a wide variety of places in peoples yards. The most common whirligigs are ducks on a pedestal where their wings can whirl in the wind. Some whirligigs are placed in flower beds, low to the ground, while others are located up high in the middle of the yard. Comic figures, such as "Beep-Beep the Roadrunner," are starting to appear in whirligig form.

Windmills and Wellhouses. Windmills are elaborate whirligigs, symbols of a past technology, that are very prevalent in Gibson. Some yards sport metal scale models of the type of windmills that used to be a common sight on Midwestern farmsteads. Other yards contain wooden models of Dutch windmills. There are also a few examples of windmills or large whirligigs stylized out of found items, such as automobile parts. Wellhouses are the only other type of realistic sculpture frequently found in Gibson City Yard. Like most windmills, the wellhouses in peoples yards are only models that hearken back to past technology.

Found Objects. This category includes the types of unmodified, familiar objects that people in the area are liable to display in their yard, usually in a configuration with flowers and other objects. Most such found objects are antique tools: pumps, plows, kettles. etc.

What I find most striking is the fact that all the common objects in the local repertoire of yard art point rather directly to basic 'elements:' air (whirligigs and windmills), water (windmills, pumps, and well houses), and earth (plows and flower beds). I am tempted to say that fire is the domestic element, associated with the hearth indoors. The prevalence of birds points to the animal kingdom. What is noticeably absent are representations of humans.

### III. ART PROCESSES IN RURAL CENTRAL ILLINOIS

One of the outstanding features of the cultural scene in Ford County, as it appeared to this outside observer, is the fact that there appears to be much more artistic activity among women than among men. I want to warn the reader to avoid drawing unwarranted implications from this assertion: for example, that men are not involved in artistic creation or are considered lacking in artistic sensibilities, or that one artistic domain, the male or female, is valued higher than the other. Based on my fieldwork --which, of course has not been comprehensive--it seems that women's art has a much larger public profile than men's art.

As a generalization, I believe that women's art is more closely integrated with the social life of this rural Illinois community, while men's art is more of a personal matter. Again, a caveat against reading more into this statement than is intended: I am not implying that artistic creation on the part of women does not involve a personal dimension, nor that men's art involves no social significance. What seems to be generally true is that there is a complex and extensive network, or set of networks, through which women's artistic activities are channeled into larger social goals. Since such networks are almost totally lacking in the male domain, I would argue that the personal meanings of artistic creation stand out as an important pattern for men. Women, of course, also discover and invest personal meanings in their artistic activities; but they also have a variety of communal contexts for such activities that are noticeably absent in the male artistic domain.

#### *A. THE SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF WOMEN'S ART*

Nearly every example of women's art that I encountered explicitly serves a social relationship. These social relationships can be grouped into five categories of social contexts for art: 1) quilts and quilting, 2) family and home, 3) the county fair, 4) bazaars, and 5) classes, shops and sales. Note that only the first category is associated with an art form. This is a sign of the power and prestige the quilting tradition has within the rural culture of central Illinois.

##### *1. Quilts and Quilting*

In the last ten years or so there has been an upsurge in interest in quilting in central Illinois, as there has been elsewhere in the country. Quilting has been a long-standing and vital tradition in Anglo-American folk culture. The current revival, promoted in part by various organs of popular culture, has not eclipsed the older styles or values, but has merged modern and traditional aspect to create a new mixture that is of great importance in the contemporary culture of Ford County, Illinois.

Today, quilting has achieved a prestige in this community that it may not have enjoyed a decade or two ago. In the Gibson City area, quilting is almost exclusively a female activity. The making and marketing of quilts, and the process of transmitting the tradition to a new generation, have brought numerous women into a web of social connections that embraces other cultural activities and social events. The relationships quilting serves belong to the other four categories of social contexts listed above: family and home, the county fair, bazaars, classes, shops and sales.

Traditionally, quilts were made by women for use in the home; and the art of quilting was taught at home, so that the tradition was transmitted from one generation to the next within the family. Numerous examples of this phenomenon can be found in Ford County families. Yet another way in which quilts function within the family, and this is a function that seems to be increasing in importance today, is that quilts as art objects often have what is popularly called a "sentimental" value. Many women consider it especially meaningful to give quilts they have made to their offspring. Some women in Ford County have set a goal for themselves to make a quilt for each of their children and grandchildren, or for each of their daughters and daughters-in-law. Similarly, many men and women value owning a quilt that was made by their mother or grandmother. This has the additional effect of supplying work to older women who are good at quilting, for people often have an unquilted top pieced by their grandmother that they will pay to have quilted. (See Appendix II.A.1.)

Women who make quilts usually like to show them off. Most people who make or have quilts say they should be used. It is therefore very common to find quilts out on beds. Some are in frequent use as bedspreads, and show a degree of wear, while others are displayed on guests beds that are infrequently used. I have also heard of people displaying quilts by hanging them on a wall, but I witnessed no such cases. A few quilt shows have been held in central Illinois. At the 1983 Ford County Fair, there was a quilt show held in conjunction with the Ladies' Day activities sponsored by the Cooperative Extension Service. And a number of quilts are entered in the Textiles and Fine Arts Department at the fair every year, where they not only are judged, but are put on public display. (See Appendix II.A.2.)

Craft bazaars generally emphasize the sale of smaller items, but several bazaars in the area have offered quilts for sale. The rule seems to be that if there is to be a quilt sold, there will be only one, and it will be sold in a special manner, such as a silent auction or raffle. Women involved with bazaars in Ford County are aware of quilt raffles held at similar events elsewhere. But what I found in Ford County were two examples of quilts being sold at Methodist Church bazaars by means of silent auctions, because raffles seemed to be a kind of gambling, and thus not in line with the beliefs of the church. What is even more significant about these two cases is the co-operative labor which produced these two quilts for bazaars held by the Methodist churches in Melvin and Sibley. (For these stories, see Appendix II.A.3.)

Some of the social connections centered on quilting are, to a greater or lesser extent, economic relationships. (The co-operatively created quilts sold at a bazaar also serve economic relationships; but the women who made these quilts donated their materials, labor, and time to raise money for their churches.) This category of social contexts includes both the straightforward exchange of goods for cash in the case of women who sell quilting supplies in their shops, and in the case of women who sell quilts they've made through personal contacts or through stores; and the exchange of cash for a service that has an additional social aspect for those involved. In this latter category I would include quilting classes and quilting clubs. Some women hold quilting classes that benefit them financially, but they also do it to transmit a tradition they value. And women pay to take a class to learn quilting, but as is true of all such classes, they are also occasions for socializing. The quilting clubs I heard about consist of older women getting together once a week during the winter to quilt for pay. In at least one case, they do it to raise money for their church. (See Appendix II.A.4.)

## ***2. Family and Home***

The family relationships that quilting has traditionally reinforced are also served by other traditional art forms practiced through the years, as well as by those crafts whose popularity is more contemporary. For some people, the embroidered linens and needlepoint created by their mothers or grandmothers have a special value for connecting the generations. Also, a number of women intend to or have crocheted afghans, knitted or crocheted doilies, made pillows, etc. for each of their children or grandchildren. Whether or not women consciously set out to make an equivalent item for each of their offspring, most of the art objects they create are given to family members. A reversal of the pattern of the older woman making something for a younger family member can be seen in the case of "folk art." This form of "method" painting is especially popular with young women who are raising families. They often take up folk art for its psychological values as a way to escape everyday tensions of parenting and homemaking, but soon they are creating pieces in which they have enough pride to use as gifts. Invariably, the young artist's mother is the first person to receive such a gift. One such artist, Margo Quick, pointed out that it was just like when she was a child and her mother displayed all her art work on the refrigerator door. Giving home-made art as gifts also reinforces relationships that families have with others. Folk art, doilies, etc. are considered good presents for weddings and other special occasions in the lives of nieces, nephews, cousins, friends and neighbors. In the view of many people, giving home-made art makes the gift special. (See Appendix II.B.)

## ***3. The County Fair***

The Ford County Fair at Melvin is an important artistic outlet for the small number of people who choose to participate. The judging categories in the Home Ec and Agriculture departments are open to anyone, not just residents of Ford County, who wants to show their work. A number of people from outside the county do enter at the Ford County Fair: for example, one of last year's prize-winning quilts was made by a McLean County woman (there seems to be something of a fair sub-culture in Illinois, comprised of people who enter a lot of fairs in attempts to earn prize money). But in terms of participants from Ford County, most who enter their work at the fair are from the Melvin area. Also, the people who volunteer to work on the fair, to serve as department chairperson's or assistants or to serve on the Fair Board, are almost all from the Melvin community. The only real county-wide base of support comes from the activities sponsored by the County Cooperative Extension Service through the Home Economics Club or 4-H.

For the visual arts and crafts there are 85 prize categories in the Textiles and Fine Arts Department and 41 categories in the Miscellaneous or Crafts Department. Other forms of women's art not explored in depth in this project can be entered in the Cooking and Floriculture Departments. Though there are a few categories in Crafts that are specifically for men, none of these Departments are officially closed to men. The Amateur Photography Class does attract a mixture of entries from both genders, and the Junior Division has entries from both boys and girls who are not members of 4--H clubs in Ford County. But on the whole, the Home Ec building and the departments is houses are thought of locally as the women's part of the fair. (See Appendix II.C.1.)

As a social context for artistic activity, the fair serves primarily as a structured public display of what women have traditionally done and are currently doing. The local women who work in the various departments have full responsibility for what takes place in the Home Ec building. Tradition, how it has always been done, guides most of their actions. But if problems arise, as they did a few years back when a number of non-residents were dominating the canning prizes, the women in charge can come up with a solution--in this case, the Canning Department was eliminated. The women, especially those who work with the Crafts Department, suggest changes every few years in the prize categories, based on their knowledge of what kinds of things are no longer being entered and what new art forms are growing in popularity. Changes in the structure of the Home Ec Department, which all so far have been minor changes, except for the one, are recommended to the all-male Fair Board, which mediates between the women's requests and the State requirements on which hinge the allocation of prize money. The women in the Home Ec division don't attend many meetings. They rely on informal contacts to see that everything gets done that needs to be done. If a chairperson steps down, generally one of her assistants, whose help she had originally asked for personally, is asked to take over the responsibility. The Fair Book lists the women on the committees as "co-chairmen." But I believe that informally one woman is thought of as "in-charge" and the others as her assistants.

The committees' responsibilities before the fair are for each to see that their department has a judge, to help clean up the Home Ec building, and to make sure that the proper equipment, supplies and personnel will be there during the fair. The only direct involvement of men in the workings of the Home Ec Department are to help set up the tables and display cases. Husbands and Fair Board members fulfill this duty. Wednesday, thought of by the women as the "first day" of the fair (though livestock, farm implement displays and the midway arrive on Tuesday) is the busiest day in the Home Ec building. Entries are accepted from 9:00 A.M. to 12:00 Noon. The women working register all the entries in a book supplied by the Fair Board, and attach a card with a number to each item entered. Judging is supposed to start at 1:00, but it in fact begins as soon after 12:00 as each judge is ready. The committee women bring to the judge the appropriate items in each category as she is ready for them. When the judge has chosen a 1st, 2nd and 3rd in each category, the women record the results in the book, write the winners' name on the attached cards and staple on the appropriate ribbon: blue, red and white. After all the judging is complete, the record books are returned to the Fair Office, and the women arrange the entries in a pleasing display. Their last responsibility is to schedule people to sit at the Department and keep an eye on the exhibits until the participants pick up their entries between 4:00 and 6:00 P.M. on Saturday. The winners collect their prize money at the Fair Office. (See Appendix II.C.2.)

The Home Ec building often becomes crowded while the judging is going on, for people are constantly coming in to see how things are going and to check on their entries. The Cooking Department attracts the most attention. A number of women bring in lawn chairs and stake out a spot for themselves well ahead of time. The cooking judge, a man from Mahomet, likes to talk with people about his decisions. Also, a sample is taken from each item and placed in a basket at the front of the judges table. The spectators are invited to taste the samples. The Home Ec building during judging time was also a meeting opportunity for women involved in crafts. The younger women who work in the Departments also tend to be involved with crafts in other contexts, such as classes or shops. Some of the judges were engaged through these contexts.

Others, including some who have no entries in the fair, come in to see the judges and women they know through various contexts. The aspect of the fair as a social gathering is obviously important. In terms of art, it also reinforces the social connections local women have formed through other artistic activities. (See Appendix II.C.1.)

#### **4. Bazaars**

Most of the bazaars held in rural central Illinois are fund- raising events sponsored by the women's organizations of various churches to raise money for their church; though the only non-church bazaar I discovered, that sponsored by the Gibson City Hospital Auxiliary seems to be the biggest. The Hospital Auxiliary's bazaar, held for the last 15 years or so, may also be the most important one in the area, for some women think that its success may have stimulated the current spate of church bazaars. Churches had held bazaars in the past, even before there was a Hospital Auxiliary; but they began to decline in the 1960s. It seems that the modern bazaars follow the Auxiliary's pattern of relying heavily on the sale of art and craft items. The predecessors of the modern craft bazaar emphasized instead a large dinner fixed by the women from foodstuffs donated by members of the church. I'm not sure to what extent crafts and other sorts of activities were important at these events. But locally, today's "craft bazaars" are identified with the "big church dinners" held twenty to thirty years ago. Nor am I sure to what extent the men and children of the congregation played a part in organizing and executing the earlier events. Today, however, church bazaars are almost totally the doing of the women of the church. Husbands help by setting up tables, attending the event, and making purchases, as well as by "putting up with their wives" while the latter devote a lot of time and energy to preparing for the event.

Most of the modern crafts bazaars in the area seem to be held at Methodist churches. The Lutheran church in Sibley used to have a bazaar, but the current pastor, who has been there for at least ten years, won't allow a bazaar to be held. He justifies his policy by comparing a bazaar to the money-changers Jesus threw out of the temple, according to the New Testament. One lady says, "it all depends on who the pastor is," implying that such moral reasoning is tolerated but not shared in the local community. Others explain that some ministers think that the members of a church should support the church through donations of money. The local idea seems to be that bazaars are a way for people to support the church by donating their time and talents. It should also be noted that the importance of the earlier big church dinners lay in the fact that the members donated food they raised, which could be converted, through donated labor, into financial support for the church. A reason for the demise of the church dinners is the decline of subsistence farming activities and the almost total reliance on cash crops. Church dinners today would not raise much money for a church, because people don't grow usable foodstuffs anymore. They rely on supermarkets for their meals at home, so a big church dinner today would require an initial outlay of cash that would not yield a high cash profit.

Most bazaars in the Gibson City area are similarly structured. They feature a number of booths: e.g., baby items, toys, flowers, antiques, books, candy, baked goods, home-made noodles, with the arts and craft booth, and the lunch room (not a big meal, but soup, sandwich, pie and coffee) the biggest money makers. The planning of a bazaar usually means getting someone to volunteer to head up each booth. Planning the lunch is a big job that often is overseen by the same people from year to year. The arts and craft booth generally requires the most pre-event

planning. There are two basic organizational models for planning crafts for a bazaar. The first model features a strong leader who plans craft workshops in which women get together to make up craft kits to be passed out to the other women at church, who take them home and work on them. These leaders are usually "good at crafts," so they make a lot of the items that will be sold. (Virginia Jones and Gwen Lindholm are examples of leaders who organize activity along the lines of this model.) The second model features a reliance on tradition. The women know what sorts of craft items are needed, so they work on them throughout the year and bring them to the church on the day of the bazaar. (Marilyn Bell and Margaret Hunt provide examples of bazaars organized along the lines of this model.)

Craft bazaars are associated with the fall of the year. There is always a great emphasis placed on Christmas items. As mentioned earlier, some bazaars have a separate Christmas booth, or at least a table. Christmas tree ornaments and other sorts of holiday decorations, especially wreaths, are sold at such events. Also, I was told that one of the reasons behind the success of bazaars is that they provide an opportunity for people to do a lot of Christmas shopping: that is, for the smaller gifts that one needs to buy, such as for the kids' teachers, for co-workers, for "stocking-stuffers." Since the giving of gifts at Christmas can be seen as a visible acknowledgment of social connections, and a reinforcement of sociability within these relationships, the craft bazaars take on an added social significance. They provide a market for home-made art that is to some extent considered more appropriate for acknowledging the importance of social networks in a small rural community. The story Ruth Donovan told about the sale of quilt made by the women at the Methodist church in Melvin also shows how special gifts can be bought at such events to celebrate and reinforce primary relationships. (See Appendix II.A.4 for the quilt story and Appendix II.D about bazaars in general.)

### ***5. Classes, Shops and Sales***

This category covers the economic contexts of women's art in rural central Illinois. A number of women who have become proficient in an art form offer classes which other women pay to take. The classes are offered in a variety of settings. Some women hold classes in their homes and rely on word of mouth to bring them students. Some classes are promoted by other organizations, such as churches or the Homemakers' Extension Association. The most popular setting for classes, however, is the craft shop where books and supplies can be purchased, and examples of art can be seen and purchased. There are two such craft shops in Gibson City: the Knit Wit Shop and newly opened Fine Folk Art shop, where Marge Barry is counting heavily on classes to promote what she is trying to do. Painting classes offered at craft shops in Paxton and Rantoul, as well as those at Parkland College in Champaign-Urbana, have been important for the growing popularity of tole painting and folk art in Ford County. (See Appendix II.A.4 on quilting classes and Appendix II.E.1 on folk art classes.)

There are two craft shops in Gibson City where local artists can sell their works. Work by artists from other parts of the country is also available in both shops. The two shops, however, are very different in terms of philosophy. Marge Barry, on the one hand, opened Fine Folk Art, not only to make money, but also to promote the art forms that she loves in Gibson City. A former school-teacher, her well-thought out aesthetic includes trying to show people that they can indeed create art. The shop is seen by she and her husband Lee as something they can both work

with as he begins to turn his business over to his son. Linda Baillie's *Homespun Treasures*, on the other hand, was started purely as a business venture. She is not an artist herself; and now that the shop is established she wants to sell it to someone else and go on to her next challenge, real estate. (See Appendix II.E.2.)

Though many women have occasionally sold art objects they have made, a few women have turned their attention to making items that can be marketed. Again, I discovered two basic patterns in women's marketing strategies. The first pattern is more casual: that is, to rely on word of mouth and personal contacts. Most women who sell something they make do so in this manner; but a few women have developed a consciousness that a market exists for their products. In some cases, such women set prices for their specialties: for example, Marilyn Gudenrath has standard prices for her knitted doilies that people order from her. In other cases, women know through a personal contact what kind of objects sell, and they make a number of these to be distributed through that contact: Velcie Stroh's counted cross-stitch Christmas ornaments are an example of this marketing strategy. The second pattern for marketing involves identifying oneself as an artist and searching out markets. Selling items to craft shops, either wholesale or on consignment, is one alternative. Another ready alternative is to begin to display and sell one's work at craft shows and flea markets in the area. Donna Reiner's "Creative Corner" and the two shops represent examples of the first sort of outlet. Jane Froidcoeur offers an example of someone trying to sell her work at craft shows and flea markets in three or four county area. (See Appendix II.E.3.)

### ***B. MEN'S ART AND PERSONAL MEANINGS***

In comparison with the extensive social networks through which women's artistic activities are invested with social meaning in rural central Illinois, men create art in relative isolation. There are few, if any, regular or conventional social contexts in which men's art is related to the life of the community. The only one I encountered was the fact that several men I talked to learned stained-glass art in classes taught by Lee Barry. He intends to offer more classes at his wife Marge's shop, but is the only male teacher she has on her roster. I know of no other local men who have taught art or craft classes. If men want to learn more about an art form, acquire new techniques, or find new ideas, they usually turn to sources from outside the local area, such as woodworking magazines. It is also easy to imagine that they pick up ideas of things to do and ways to solve problems in the course of daily conversation at the local café. Tools and machines, how they work, and how to solve technical and mechanical problems are favorite subject among groups of men drinking coffee together; and though I encountered no specific discussions artistic activity, I'm sure that woodworking techniques and problems are occasionally discussed.

A few local men have offered their work for sale in local outlets, but most men's attempts at marketing are casual. Ernie Schroeder, for example, placed samples of his furniture miniatures in a glass display case at a local restaurant, accompanied by a rough, hand-lettered price list, only because someone said they thought he could sell some there. He did make a few sales, but has not expended any further efforts in selling his work. Shorty Klein, who has some pieces of wooden furniture at Marge Barry's shop, is the only local man I know who is trying to sell items

through a craft shop. A few men have tried selling at craft fairs and flea markets with varying degrees of success. (See Appendix III.A.)

Most men work alone on projects that interest them, with little concern for where their work ends up. The major exception to this rule is to be found in the case of men who make toys; they often have their grandchildren in mind when they make them. It is also common for men to make toys, whirligigs, and other objects to fill special orders that are almost always placed through family members or neighbors. Herb Steidiger began making toys and models in which he was interested. He gave some of the to his grandchildren; and then received requests for specific objects, first from his grandchildren, and then through them for others. Robert Crossman claims, to the contrary, that he's not given away any of the items he's made. Ernie Schroeder knows that his children are going to have trouble deciding who gets his wooden model of the farm he grew up on after he's gone, but he's not concerning himself with that decision. I found no examples of men to correspond with the women who set a goal for themselves to make a quilt or afghan for each of their offspring. Nor did I encounter any men who made craft objects to sell at a bazaar or display at the county fair, though I am sure that some have. (See Appendix III.B.)

Though men's art in Ford County, Illinois lacks the multitude of social meanings found in the domain of women's art, the male world of art is rich in personal meanings. The pattern that I frequently discovered shows a connection between men's art and the life cycle. As Ernie Schroeder says, "every man should have a hobby when he retires." Indeed, most of the male artists I found were retired or nearing retirement. It seems that a lot of them turned to artistic creation as a means of relaxation when they found themselves with a lot of time on their hands. Here lies the key to the personal meaning of men's art. These men at last have the time to be creative in a way that pleases them, without having to answer to anyone else. Since they have completed their working lives, and the responsibilities of being productive in a way that supplies a means of life for their families, these men are now free to be productive for purely aesthetic reasons. Their ideas of beauty can now override economic concerns.

There is an additional, and most interesting pattern in the personal meanings I was able to discover in men's art. The artistic activity of men in the Gibson City area affirmed their cultural identity by locating them within a community whose life is centered on agriculture. It is common for men in rural central Illinois to describe their working lives as "working with my hands." I find this phrase very interesting, for it refers to working with machinery and tools, which involves a great deal of problem solving and other mental, if not conceptual, processes. This phrase is common in American culture, but it seemed to be often used in Gibson City with a special reference to farm life. Farmers have to be good at "working with their hands" in order to keep their tools and implements in working order. The relevance of this phrase for artistic activity, is that some men told me that they were able to create art objects out of wood with no special training because they had spent their lives working with their hands. Of course, farmers aren't the only ones who spend their lives in this fashion. What I find striking is the identification of working with your hands and being a farmer. What is implied seems to be some sort of natural nobility attached to the farmer who is able to survive by the work of his own hands. In this way, men's art in rural central Illinois is an affirmation of their cultural identity as farmers in spirit, if not in fact. Indeed, some of the men I interviewed had grown up on farms but had not been able to go into farming themselves, though they all said they wished they could still be on the farm. A lot of the

art they created shows an emotional bond with the farms of their youth: the most notable example is Ernie Shroeder's elaborate wooden model of the farmstead near Anchor where he was raised. (See Appendix III.B.)