

## Commitment to Community in Public Folklore

*Richard March  
Wisconsin Arts Board*

It was June, 1983. I had just flown to Utah from Milwaukee for a conference at Utah State University, during which individuals would report on the results of our research/recording efforts in Carbon County. As I made my way into the dorm where I'd be staying, I ran into John Costello and Tony Kokal, Slovenian coal miners/button accordion players with whom I'd spent several days the previous year. Although I was delighted to see them, I had a knot in my gut. We hadn't been in touch for nearly a year. During the fieldwork we developed that familiar warm and intense relationship born of me being the young guy so interested in their every word and thrilled with their every tune. But I hadn't followed up as promised. I was swept up in new projects, new directions.

As we shook hands and embraced, Tony spoke up first. "We were going to send you a Christmas card or something..." he trailed off. A wave of relief and understanding swept over me. Tony was feeling as guilty as I for not being in touch. We could forgive each other, then forget it. The problem wasn't our personal omissions so much as the difficulty of maintaining a relationship established during fieldwork after being separated by half a continent.

I was in an ironic spot. I grew up in a tight, extended family and ethnic community. I esteemed community cohesiveness, so much so that it influenced my choice of a career in folklore. But I felt alienated and isolated working as an independent contractor, finishing a dissertation and hoping for an academic career. During that same Utah conference, the director of the Wisconsin Arts Board tracked me down by telephone to schedule an interview for the folk arts coordinator's job I was destined to start about a month later. Seventeen years later I still hold this position.

I am reminded of an article written in the 1960s by Tamas Hofer, a Hungarian scholar who spent a year as a visiting professor in the United States. In the article he compared the lives of American anthropologists to those of European ethnologists. According to Hofer, European ethnologists tended to live and work their entire careers in cities where their families had been for generations. They lived only a short distance from their field contacts, whom they saw repeatedly on short visits at regular intervals over many years. They spoke the same language.

American anthropologists, he observed, lived a more nomadic life style. Every few years they were likely to change universities to advance their careers.

They tended to carry out research in a distant place, often on a different continent. They went “to the field” for a whole year or more, strove to learn the local language, and endeavored to create a book-length ethnography, to bring back a total picture of the culture. The anthropologists’ choice of titles for their works reflected this intent: *The Forest People*, *Knowing the Gutumumba*, etc. European ethnologists, on the other hand, tended to work incrementally, producing more of their opus in the form of short articles. Their titles reflected modest goals: “Some Characteristics of the Pottery Styles in Donja Dubrava” or “Concerning the Melody of a Rumanian Christmas Song.”

I have come to realize that my work and life at the Arts Board more closely resembles Hofer’s picture of European ethnologists than his view of American anthropologists. This has proven to be personally sustainable for me. I have worked with hundreds of people, building a network of field contacts which represents the kind of connectedness that I require personally and professionally. These people know me as a reliable resource who will endeavor to help with matters of mutual interest. I am a part of a community that extends throughout the state. Nobody is farther away than a five-hour drive. I have mourned the deaths of many elders I have learned from, congratulated young families on births of their children and seen young kids mature into skilled artists. With the backing of these people, I have worked to enhance the appreciation and ensure the continued vitality of Wisconsin’s traditional arts.

My vision for the future is already under construction. We will continue to build a strong network of folklorists throughout the country. They will have established a commitment to their communities and carved out a position from which to advance a cultural policy that recognizes, honors, and advocates traditional artists as well as preserves the practice of folk traditions.

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## **Anchored in Place: Encounter, Accompaniment, and Partnership**

*Margaret “Peggy” Yocom*  
*Rangeley Lakes Region Logging Museum and George Mason University*

How did a woman from a Pennsylvania German farm family get hooked up with loggers in Rangeley, Maine? Walking in green spaces, riding in my grandfather’s lap on his tractor, watching fresh clothes snap as they dry on outdoor lines, and listening to stories flow; for me, these scenes embody life in the western Maine mountains. But it was my first encounter with Rangeley folks that has kept me traveling in their direction for twenty-five years.

In the fall of 1975, I was a folklore graduate student at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, traveling around New England looking for