Fruit To Share With The Neighbors

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In early February 1994, several weeks after the opening of the exhibition Passed to the Present: Folk Arts Along Wisconsin's Ethnic Settlement Trail, I received a letter from Sidonka Wadina Lee, a Slovak wheat-weaver whose work was included in the exhibition. The primary purpose of the letter was to request payment for several pieces of her work purchased by the Cedarburg Cultural Center for the exhibition and permanent collection. However, at the end of her note, Sidonka wrote:

Grandma used to tell me a custom practiced in Slovakia: When people moved to a new house, they always planted an apple or a fruit tree on the lot line. That way when the tree blossomed or fruited, there was fruit to share with the new neighbors. Grandma was like that apple tree. She came here to America and planted her roots. If my grandmas were alive today, they would thank you, as I am, for allowing this little tree to share its fruit with all the neighbors here in Wisconsin.

I remember being particularly moved by Sidonka’s brief message at the time that I first read it, in part because of her kind expression of gratitude for being included in the exhibition and in part because of the image she used to convey it. While I am sure that she summoned up the Slovakian custom of planting a fruit tree and sharing its produce with the neighbors as a vehicle for describing her own role in this project and in other activities within her ethnic community, I couldn’t help but realize that her description was also a perfect summary of my role as a folklorist. By organizing and presenting Passed to the Present at five different museums throughout eastern Wisconsin, I had made it possible for Sidonka to share her work with hundreds of other people who might otherwise never have seen it.

Throughout the last fifteen years, during which I have served on the staffs of three different museums, I have come to regard the role of the folklorist as “presenter,” as “facilitator,” as “bridge builder” as central to my work. I hope that the general public will one day experience the thrill that many of us have enjoyed as participant-observers of special performances and celebrations within traditional communities. Until that time I feel that I am making a significant contribution by bringing the work of artists from one culture to the attention of others in venues that are felt to be accessible and honorific.

If we continue to work toward the goal of increasing understanding by increasing familiarity with the cultures of other communities—whether through museum exhibitions, festival programs, concerts, school residencies, or publications—I feel that we as folklorists will assist in bringing about on a larger scale the close, neighborly relations that Sidonka Wadina Lee’s grandmothers passed on to her as an ideal within their community.