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THE OZARKS HERITAGE PROJECT: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

The Ozarks Heritage Project, initiated in December 2009, represents a collaboration between the West Plains Council on the Arts (WPCA), Ozark Action, Inc. (OAI), a community action agency (both WPCA and OAI are 501(c)3 entities) and Missouri State University – West Plains. This collaborative venture unites WPCA’s long-term commitment to the sustainability of regional folk culture with OAI’s objectives of fostering economic opportunity, environmental sustainability, and improving the quality of life within our region. The university strives to further a mutually beneficial relationship between the world of higher education and the cultural region it serves. The areas served by these three entities overlap to a great extent; the Ozarks Heritage Project in particular addresses Ripley, Oregon, Carter, Shannon, Dent, Texas, Howell, Wright, Douglas, Reynolds, Wayne, Iron and Ozark counties in southern Missouri.

The Ozarks Heritage Project is funded with federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds received from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) provided by the Missouri Department of Social Services, Family Support Division. The funds received from the Family Support Division are all federally funded. Additionally, WPCA has received ARRA funding with an “Arts Transform Missouri” grant from the Missouri Arts Council, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. Missouri State University-West Plains is collaborating by providing access to university personnel to fill key positions.

The Ozarks Heritage Project’s official implementation plan calls for the accomplishment of three specific goals over the course of the funding period. One is the initiation of a feasibility study regarding options for linking cultural conservation with economic opportunity in our region. One option being considered is the attainment of a National Heritage Area designation that incorporates the counties in our project area. This feasibility study will represent a major step forward in a process started more than five years ago by WPCA with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. A second goal is the development of a website that will serve as a comprehensive source of information about artistic activity, cultural resources, and cultural tourism opportunities within our region. There are, of course, many online sources of information about these subjects, but there is no single website that presents this knowledge in a systematic, integrated way; consequently, our cultural region’s “Web presence” is fragmented. We hope to remedy this situation by creating a website that will give potential visitors (and potential purchasers of cultural products from this region) a more comprehensive understanding of what the region has to offer. In doing so, we will look to the websites of existing National Heritage Areas, cultural trails, and regional tourism programs as potential models. The third goal is to develop and begin implementing strategies for marketing the work of regional traditional artists and promoting the region as a potential destination for cultural tourists, and culturally engaged prospective retirees, especially those of the “Baby Boom” generation.

Sustenance and sustainability will be pervasive themes within all three components of the Ozarks Heritage Project. The project will reflect the same commitment to cultural sustainability on which much of WPCA's programming over the past twenty years, including the annual Old-Time Music, Ozark Heritage Festival in West Plains, has been based. WPCA believes in fostering a symbiosis between cultural conservation and economic development such that cultural conservation can serve as a basis for economic development and economic development can provide an incentive for ongoing cultural conservation. Sustenance and sustainability are, in fact, pervasive themes within the regional folklife that we aim to conserve. Many of the long-established genres of folk culture prominent here – from gardening to quilting to traditional music to river folkways – reflect the efforts of the region's residents to sustain the human community, the natural environment, and the indispensable relationship between the two. One of the defining features of the culture of the Missouri Ozarks is the remarkable degree to which it is interwoven with the natural world. Another is the continuity that it exhibits with culture that predates the transformative socio-economic modernization that occurred in much of rural America during the early to mid-twentieth century. That cultural continuity – the “presence of the past within the present” – can be attributed in part to the economic disadvantage that the region has experienced throughout much of its history, but we are confident that it can, in fact, provide a basis for economic opportunity. One way in which it can do so is by attracting visitors who wish to engage thoughtfully and meaningfully with the culture of the region (rather than witnessing pop-culture caricatures or commodified distortions of it). Many such potential visitors live here in Missouri; they are Missourians who recognize the multifacetedness of their own state and wish to experience as many dimensions of it first-hand as possible. By encouraging visitors to our region of the state, the Ozarks Heritage Project will benefit this region and the state as a whole, both culturally and economically.