



▲ Folklife traditions include the foods we make. Here, Ly Pham, of the Quad Cities, demonstrates the proper way to make Vietnamese spring rolls.

Traditions

by Rachelle H. Saltzman

We all have folklife—the traditions that make us who we are in our communities. Think broadly when you think of folklife traditions, because they include everything from children's jump rope rhymes to family stories, from fish tales to sales pitches, from recipes to superstitions, from polka music to wood carving, from birthday customs to office jokes. A group's folklife reflects that group's aesthetic or way of looking at the world.

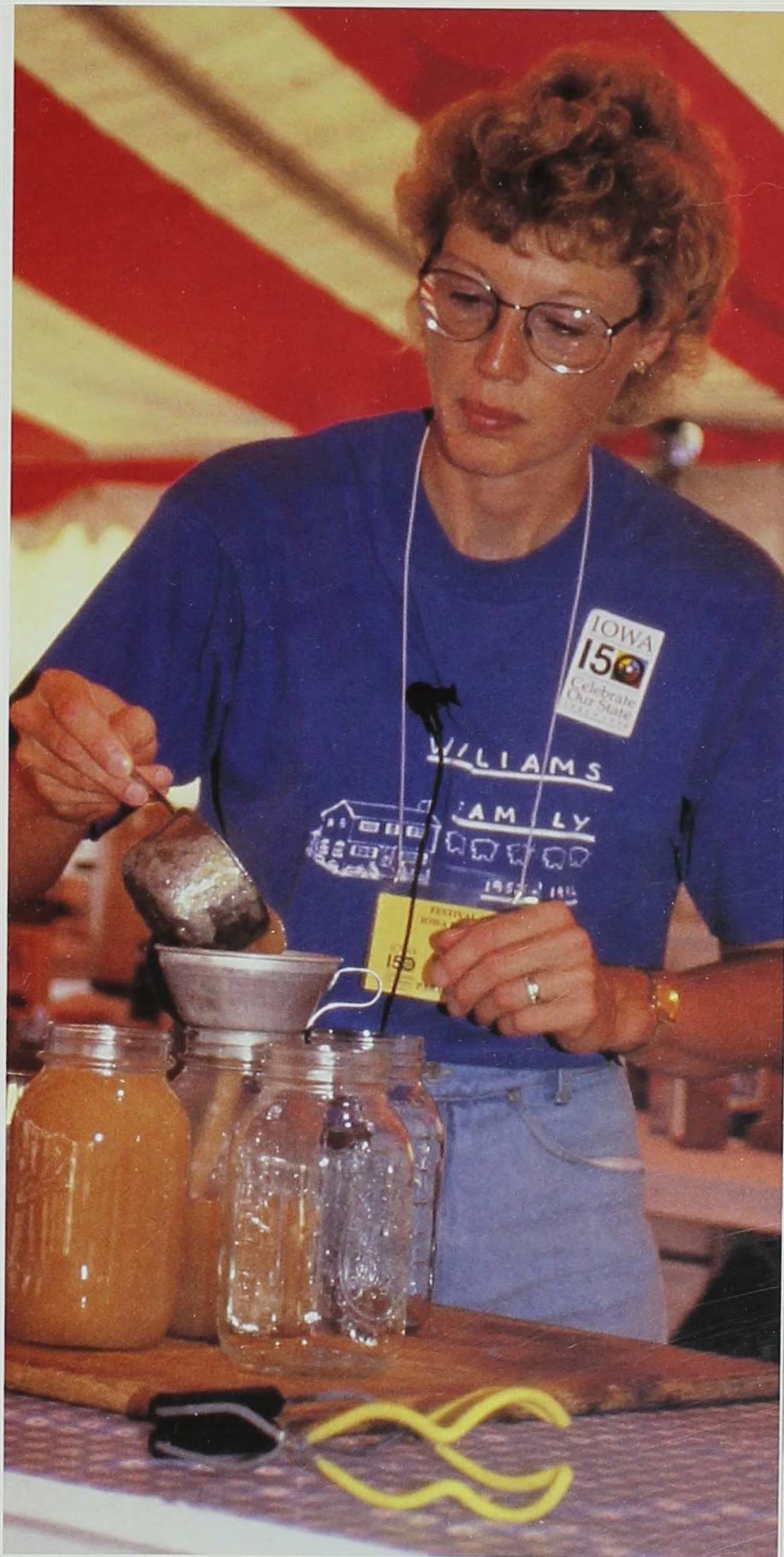
Folklife or traditional culture is the everyday knowledge and skills that we pass from one to another, through imitation or word-of-mouth, rather than through formal training. Folklife includes the foods we cook for a family gathering, the way we organize help for a neighborhood disaster, and how we celebrate our town's basketball victory. In other words, folklife traditions give us, and the communities we belong to, a sense of identity.

Those communities often are geographic—a

neighborhood, town, or region. But they might also be defined by religion, or by occupation or avocation (for example, a "community" of teachers or farmers, factory workers or quilters). Family and relatives may be thought of as a community, even if they are spread across a nation or a globe. One of the most common definitions of community and bases of folklife tradition is ethnicity.

Before the 20th century, American Indian, European American, African American, and Latin American groups and individuals, as well as Americans from the eastern states, all sought refuge in the region that became known as Iowa. They brought their foods, music, dance, song, rituals, spiritual beliefs, occupations, architecture, stories, jokes, and more. Individuals within these groups continued to produce their folklife, often in the face of considerable change and even disruption of everyday life.

But because folklife is a living process, traditions



▲ Canning foods every summer continues as a tradition among many Iowa families. Here, Donna Williams, of Villisca, fills canning jars with her homemade applesauce.



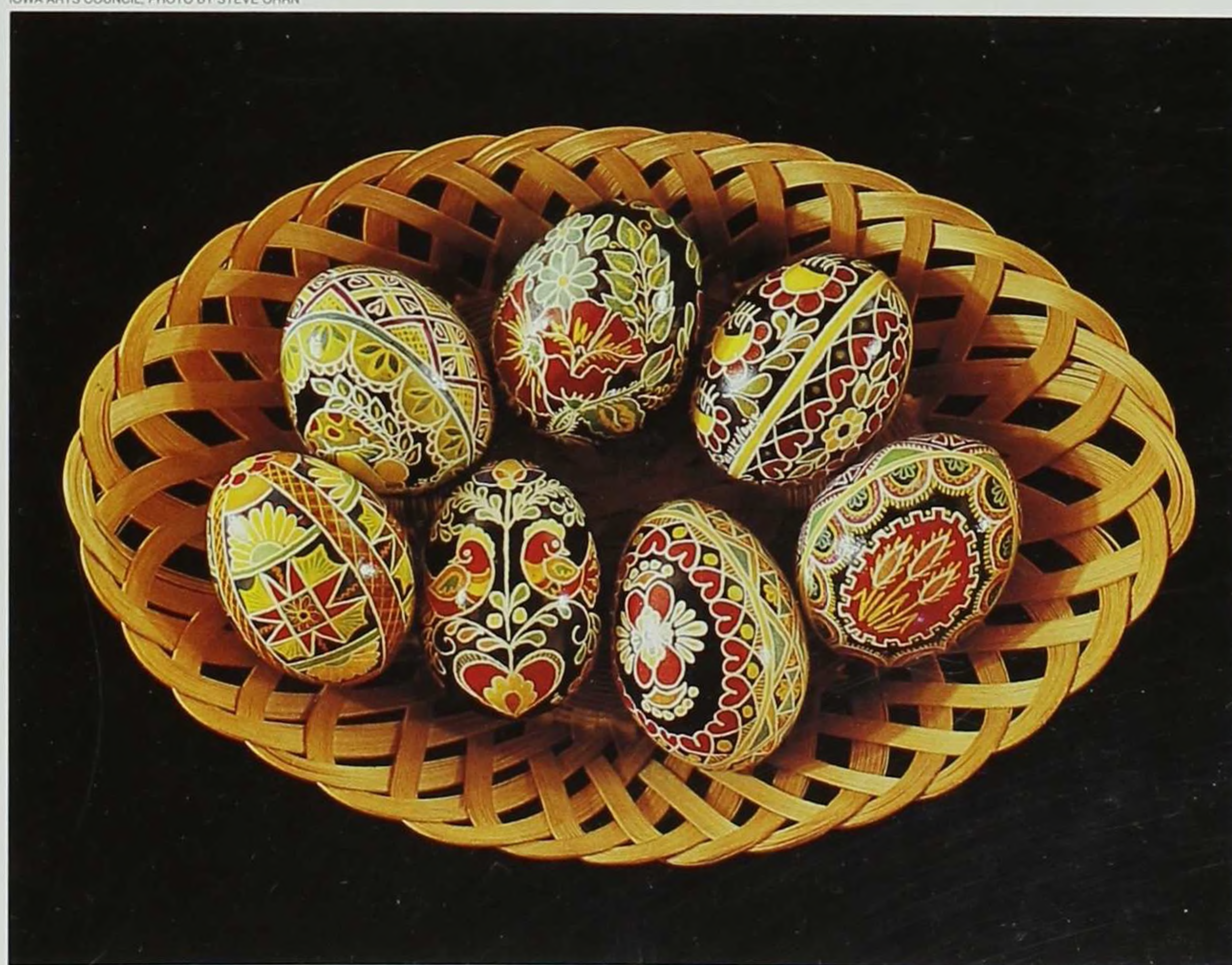
IOWA ARTS COUNCIL; PHOTO BY RACHELLE H. SALTZMAN

evolve. Changes in language and available materials affect our traditions. Technology alters our way of life, and newcomers join our communities. American Indians in the 19th century, for example, traded beading techniques and patterns with other Indians and European settlers. African American quilters adapted their ways of creating quilts to conform to more symmetrical Anglo-American styles. In the upper Midwest, Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish musicians played together, blending their techniques and tunes to create what is now known as Scandinavian Old Time music. Turn-of-the-century Dutch tulip festivals in Orange City and Pella, once held primarily as a way to remind children of their heritage, have evolved into tourist attractions for visitors. Another example of Americanization is the phenomenon of Cinco de Mayo celebrations, which commemorate Mexico's 1862 victory over Napoleon's French army. For Latinos, the day is considerably less important than September 16, Independence Day for Mexico and many Central and South American countries. Nonetheless, the catchiness of the name and an age-old European tradition of May holidays to celebrate agricultural fertility have made Cinco de Mayo a much more popular date for community and school festivals.

As yet more new groups arrived in Iowa throughout the 20th century, ethnic, occupational, religious, and family traditions continued to change. Iowa's recent history of refugee resettlement began in 1975, when Governor Robert Ray signed a contract with the U.S. State Department agreeing to take responsibility for the resettlement of 1,200 Tai Dam refugees from Southeast Asia. Since then, refugees have come to Iowa from at least 17 countries, with the largest numbers from Vietnam, Laos, Bosnia, and the Sudan. According to the 2000 census, 1.3 percent of Iowans are of Asian heritage, and 2.8 percent are of Latino background.

Yet the folklife traditions of these newcomers

IOWA ARTS COUNCIL: PHOTO BY STEVE OHRN



▲ This basket of traditional Czech Easter eggs was created by artist Marjorie Nejd of Cedar Rapids.

◀ Ornamental wrought-iron worker Dominic Rizzuti, of Des Moines, displays his artisanship. Rizzuti first learned blacksmithing as a teen in Italy. When he immigrated to Des Moines, he worked first with Italian iron artisans and then started his own business.



▲ Shanawi Aum Nassar of Cedar Rapids proudly displays a platter of Iraqi flatbread. Local Iraqis often gather at her home for dinner and festivities and consult her for advice on traditional practices.

have already begun to change to meet present-day circumstances. For example, just about every Southeast Asian New Year's celebration features a fashion show, which involves a parade of beautiful outfits, often displayed by mother-daughter pairs. Such events were unnecessary in the original country because this clothing was a part of everyday life; no one needed reminding of how women and girls traditionally dressed. Special foods, once considered everyday fare, are now reserved for holidays and other occasions because they are time-consuming and expensive to prepare in a new land.

Today, our state is witness to a host of old and new traditions that enrich our culture—from Meskwaki drumming, finger weaving, and powwows to Norwegian hardanger embroidery, fiddling, and lutefisk; from African American soul food, blues, and preaching styles to Danish *rødka*, Old Time music, and folk dancing; from Nuer hairbraiding and drumming to Tai Dam and Lao weaving and bowls of *phở*; from Amish quilts and Amana wines to Bosnian *cilim*, Somali *sambusas*, and Mexican *quinceañera* celebrations.

Watch this new department—"Traditions"—in *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* for more close-up looks at Iowa's rich folklife and traditions in transition. Until then, enjoy the colorful celebration of Iowa traditions on the following pages, followed by a special announcement of an upcoming festival.

This issue's "Traditions" writer is Rachelle H. Saltzman, Folklife Coordinator for the Iowa Arts Council in the Department of Cultural Affairs.



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IOWA ARTS COUNCIL; PHOTO BY ERIN ROTH



▲ Mary Scavo prepares traditional Italian sausage for her family's business and restaurant in Des Moines, a city with a sizable Italian-American population.

◀ A corn festival sign offers a hearty "willkommen" to visitors of Gladbrook, a Tama County community where many of the early residents spoke only German.

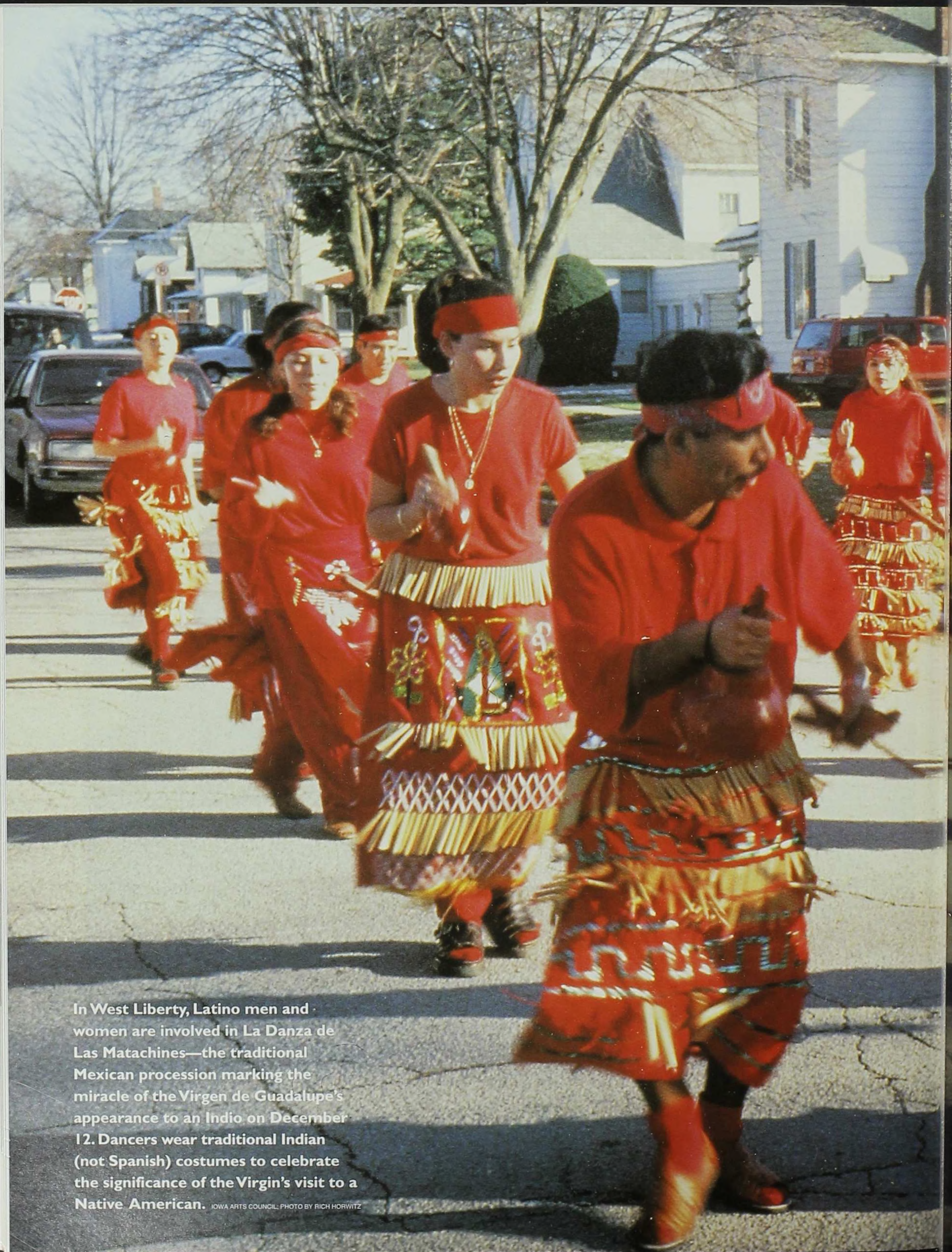


▲ Arnhild Hildesland, of Ames, demonstrates traditional Norwegian knitting. Tradition bearers like Hildesland are the keepers of folklife, through their skills, memory, and willingness to teach others.

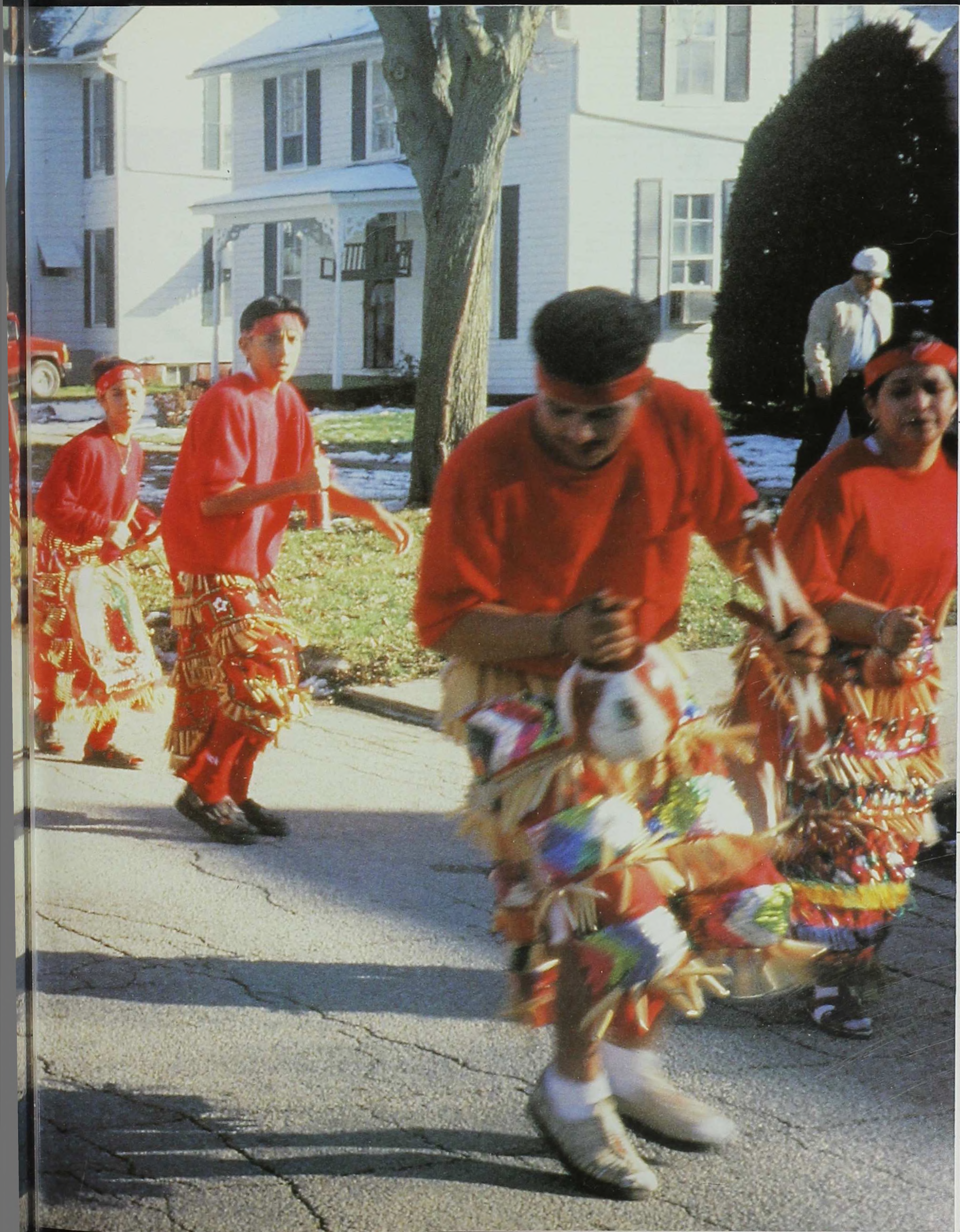
IOWA ARTS COUNCIL PHOTO BY RACHELLE H. SALTZMAN



▲ Lee Vong Her and Jennifer Her work on their second pieces of *paj ntaub* (Hmong story cloths) after six weeks of lessons from master artist Shoua Her of Oskaloosa.



In West Liberty, Latino men and women are involved in La Danza de Las Matachines—the traditional Mexican procession marking the miracle of the Virgen de Guadalupe's appearance to an Indio on December 12. Dancers wear traditional Indian (not Spanish) costumes to celebrate the significance of the Virgin's visit to a Native American. IOWA ARTS COUNCIL; PHOTO BY RICH HORWITZ





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IOWA ARTS COUNCIL. PHOTO BY RACHELLE H. SALTZMAN

▲ Meskwaki dancers of all ages celebrate community and share their traditions with the public at the annual Meskwaki Powwow at the Meskwaki Settlement near Tama.



IOWA ARTS COUNCIL. PHOTO BY KAREN HEEGE

▲ Sulejman Dolic, of Waterloo, plays an intricately hand-carved flute. A native of Bosnia, Dolic honed his woodworking skills during his stay in a Croatian refugee camp.



IOWA ARTS COUNCIL. PHOTO BY RACHELLE H. SALTZMAN

▲ Gospel singers at Mt. Olive Baptist Church in Sioux City rehearse for Sunday services. Interestingly, their church building was once a Jewish synagogue and retains many features of its former congregants' culture.

► Immerse yourself in Iowa's traditions at upcoming festivals and institutes this June. Turn the page for information on how to participate.

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