

Ethnographic Crossroads

by David A. Brose

DURING the past century America has often been called a melting pot — a place where peoples from throughout the world have come together and assimilated into one, mainstream culture called “American.” I have resisted this concept with great fervor over the past two decades — the period of time that I’ve worked in university, state, and federal contexts as an ethnomusicologist, folklorist, and community cultural developer.

Instead, I perceive American culture as many disparate and distinct peoples who have chosen to come together and form one national

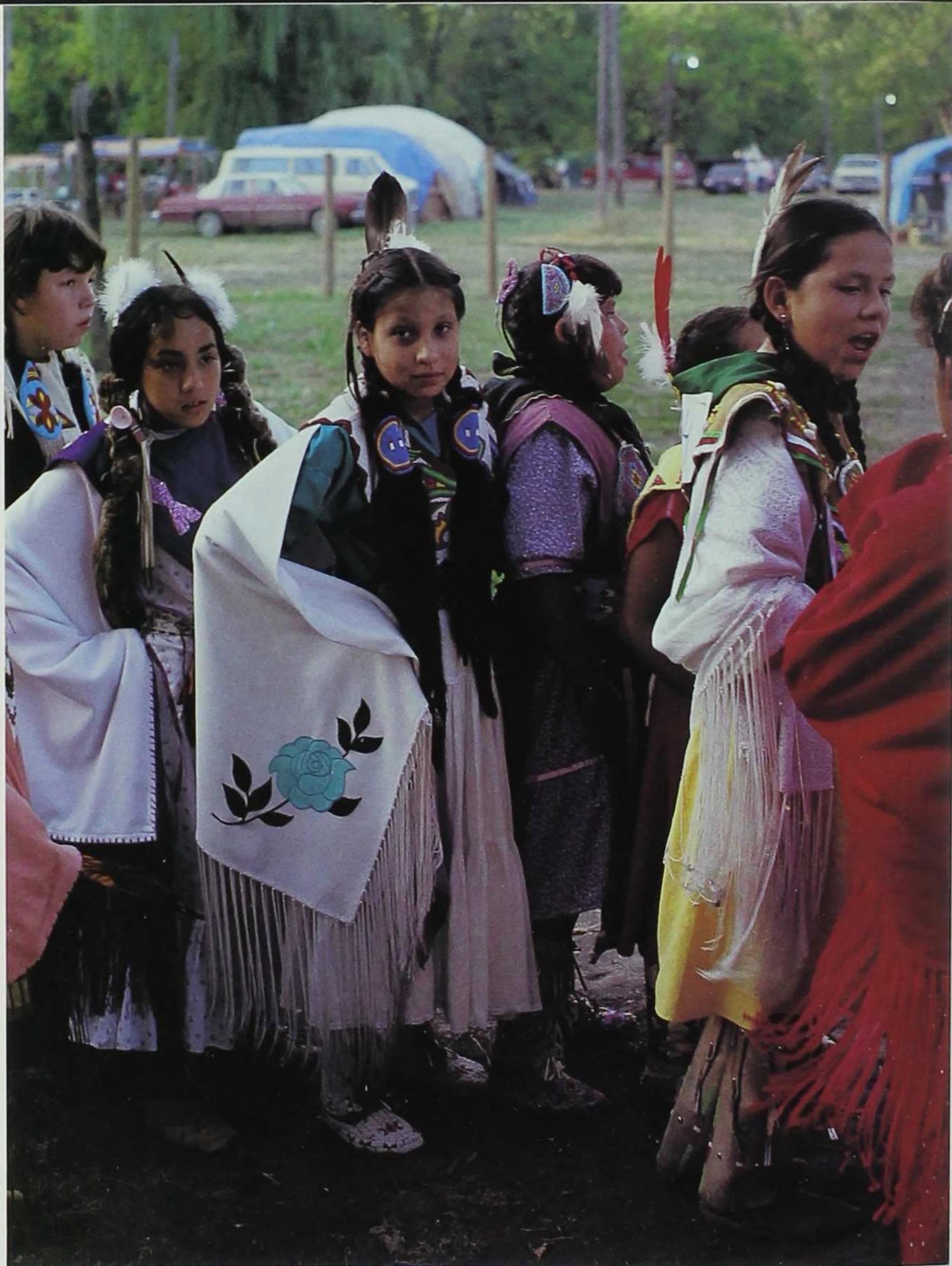
community. This national family, punctuated by many subcultures, geographic regions, and occupational groups, offers a continual array of richness and diversity to our daily experiences. The diversity would not be realized if, indeed, we were all simply “mainstreamed” into one homogeneous mass, as the so-called melting-pot theory prescribes.

Iowa continues to strike me as a cultural crossroads, where ethnic groups influence each other and yet remain close to their traditions. On the next pages, I’d like to share with you the richness of some of these groups. Consider this a colorful sampler of our cultural diversity.

Iowa as a Cultural Conduit



Iowa's ethnic richness spans the experiences and expressions of diverse groups, from the Mesquakie, who arrived over two hundred years ago, to the Hmong and Tai Dam, who emigrated from southeast Asia in the last two decades. Above, Stella Young Bear created this bandolier bag using traditional beadwork techniques of her people, the Mesquakie. The design is her own.



Mesquakie

The dynamics of cultural transmission are revealed at the annual Mesquakie powwow open to the public at the Mesquakie Settlement near Tama. Children wait to demonstrate some of the ceremonial dances they have learned from their elders.

COURTESY DAVID A. BROSE



German

Above: A traditional Amana basket. The Amana Colonies were founded by a separatist sect, the True Inspirationists, who had originally emigrated from what is now Germany. Ethnic traditions flourish in the Amanas, reflecting German culture and communal and religious traditions of the colonies. Below: German musical traditions fill the streets at the annual polkafest in Durant.



COURTESY SHERRY PARDEE



COURTESY DARLENE C. WALLINGA

Dutch

This Orange City streetcar is adorned in hindeloopen, a style of Dutch folk art practiced by Darlene C. Wallinga of that community. Hindeloopen is similar to Norwegian rosemaling.

Norwegian

Opposite: Public performances breathe life into ethnic traditions. Here, Norwegian-American singer Judith Mahlberg of Dubuque performs in the State Historical Building at the 1988 Cultural Heritage Celebration.



COURTESY DAVID A. BROSE



COURTESY DAVID A. BROSE



Czechoslovakian _____

Above: A sampler of hardanger embroidery, created by Mary Hudecek of the Czechoslovakian-American community of Pro-tivin in northeast Iowa. Opposite: Marjorie Kopecek Nejd, of Cedar Rapids, decorates eggs in a Czechoslovakian technique called *Kraslice*.



COURTESY STEVEN OHRN (SHSI)

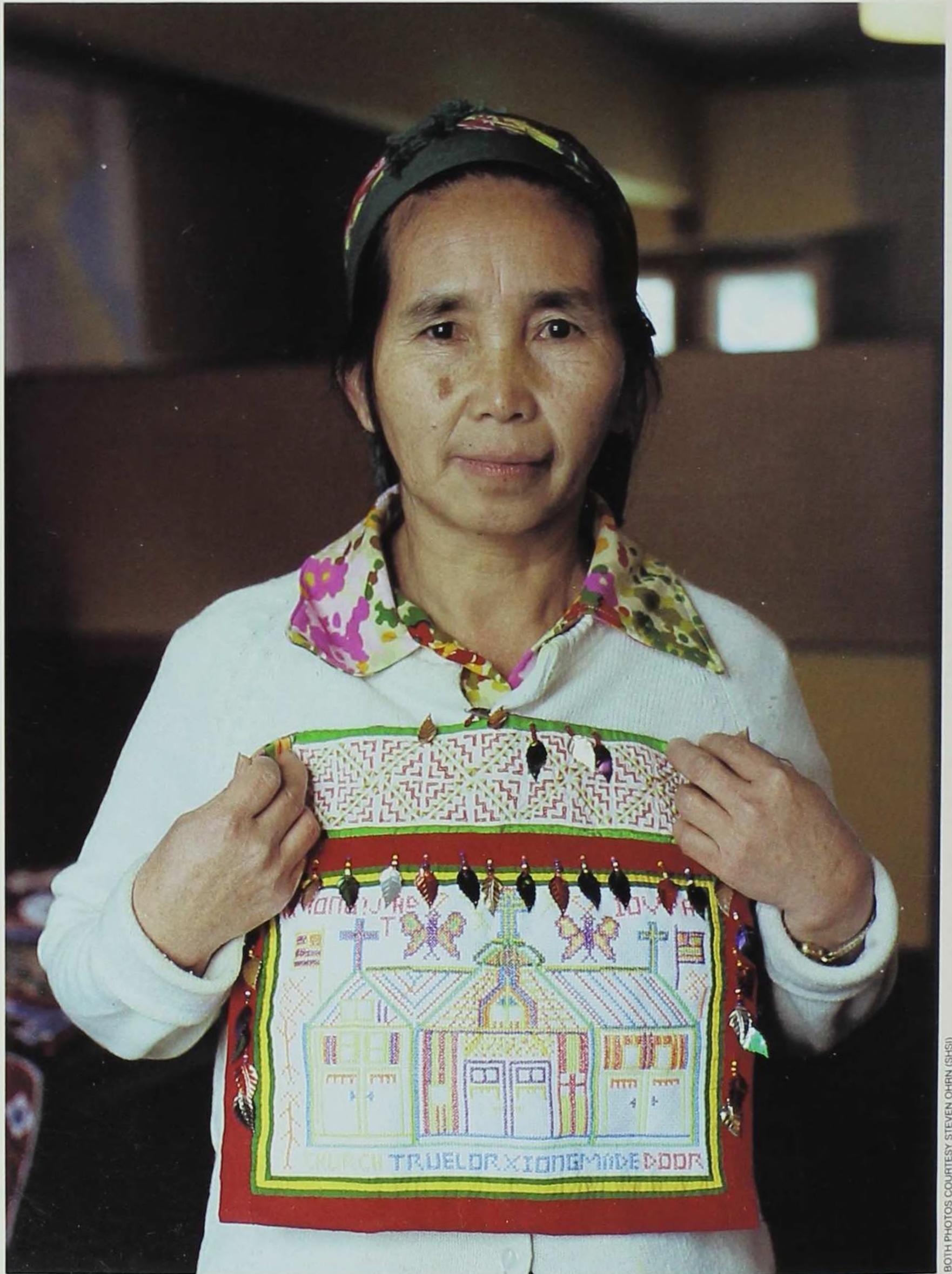


Mexican

Left: A Mexican-American folklorico dance troupe performs at the Des Moines Mexican-American Cultural Center in 1986. Below: Maria Elizondo of West Liberty created this doll for a *quinciera*, a Mexican-American celebration that marks the passage of a fifteen-year-old girl into womanhood. The doll's crocheted skirt is an example of a traditional Mexican needlework called *tejida*.



COURTESY SHERRY PARDEE



BOTH PHOTOS COURTESY STEVEN OHRN (SHSI)

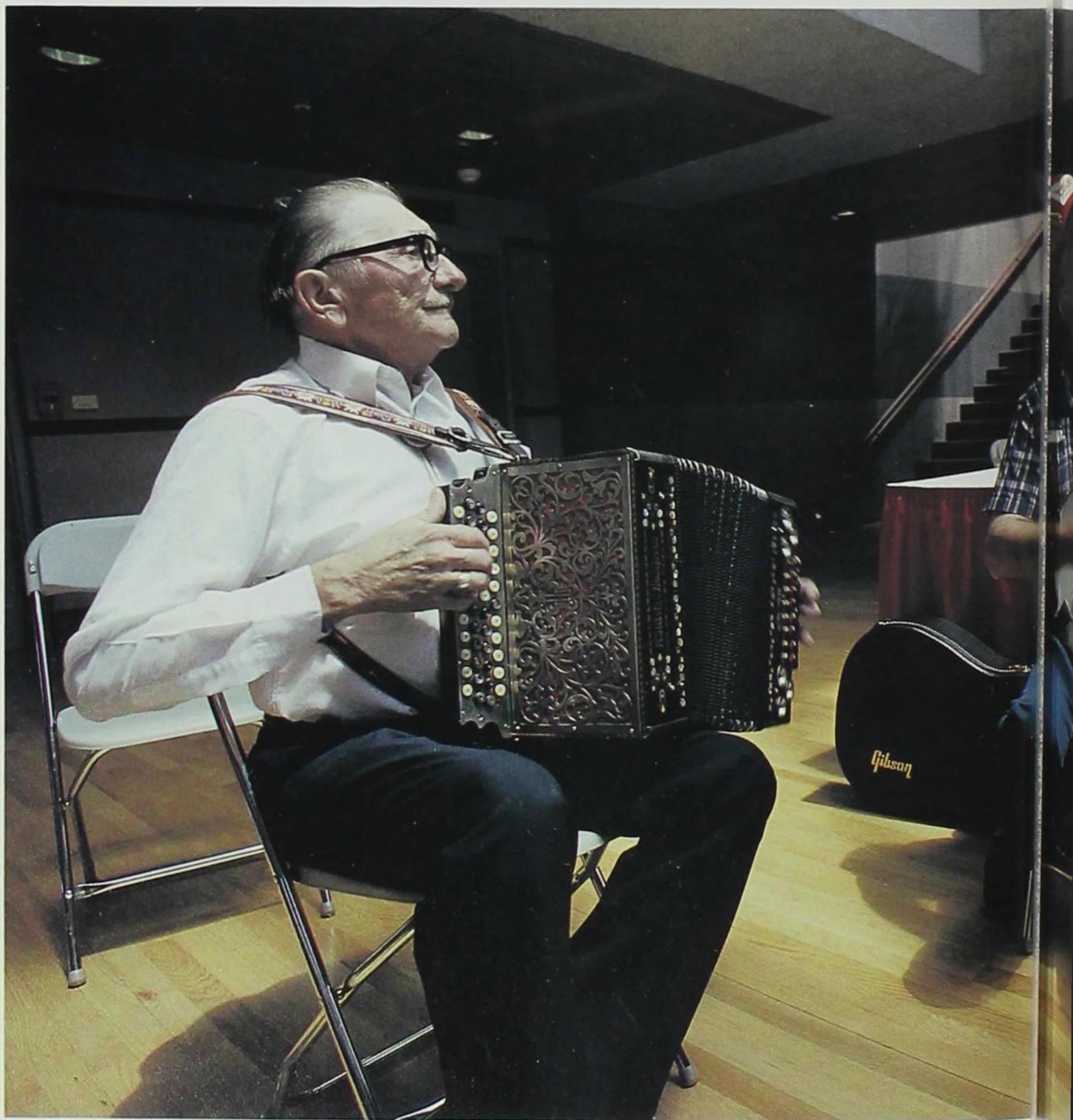


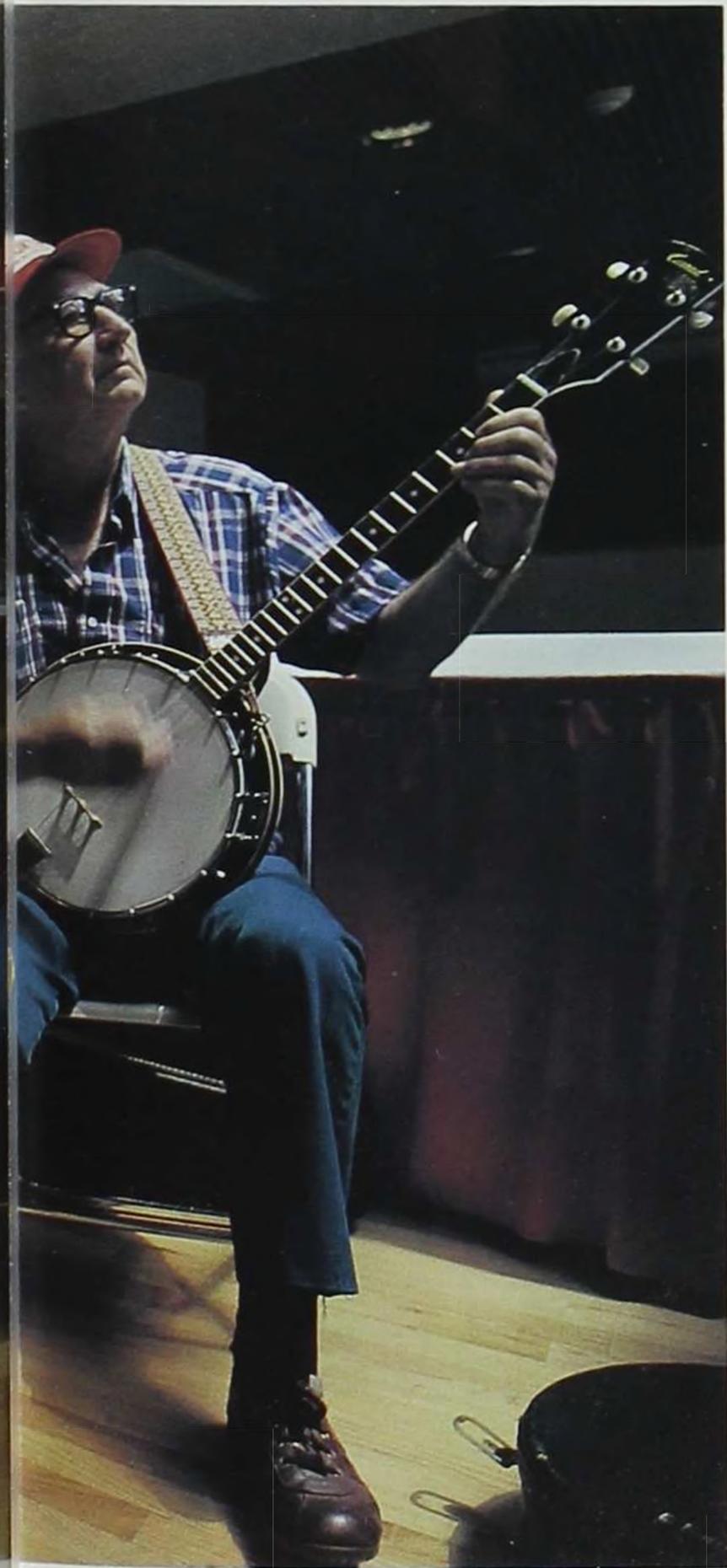
Southeast Asian

Above: A cotton-and-silk baby carrier made by Sao Thao Lee of Des Moines is ornamented with traditional Hmong needlework. Left: This cotton-and-silk sampler created by True Lor Xiong of Decorah features Hmong cross-stitch and reverse and cutwork appliqué. Made for an English-language class, the sampler depicts a Christian church and American flags and is labeled with the artist's name and the words "church door." The shiny plastic leaves, often used in American crafts today, suggest cultural exchanges of methods and materials.

At the Crossroads

Cultural crossroads occur when ethnic traditions meet and perhaps merge, exchange elements, or complement each other. At the 1988 Cultural Heritage Celebration in Des Moines, accordionist Arthur Simanek of Walker, and banjo player Eddie Bengé of Winterset performed together for the first time. Simanek plays from a Czechoslovakian heritage; Bengé from an Anglo-American Appalachian tradition.





COURTESY DAVID A. BROSE

Below: The Scandinavian technique of flat-plane figure carving manifests itself in this Iowa farmer carved of basswood by William Warrick of Des Moines. Warrick apprenticed under master carver Harley Refsal of Decorah, who has resurrected the technique. Through large, bold cuts and exaggerated features (such as the boots) a caricature develops. Some of Warrick's carvings reflect Scandinavian subjects (see front cover). Although Warrick's wife, Doris, who now paints many of his carvings, is "100 percent Swedish," Warrick is of English and German ancestry.



COURTESY WILLIAM WARRICK

COURTESY MICHAEL JAMES; PHOTO BY DAVID CARAS



Beyond the Crossroads

Some folk arts, such as quilting, transcend ethnic associations. In turn, some artists transcend the original context of their medium. Although artist Michael James first made quilts in traditional designs and techniques, his work now resembles paintings. This cotton-and-silk wallhanging, "Cascade: Double Diagonal," explores the idea of currents as movements of water and as undercurrents of emotion. Working from Massachusetts, James frequently teaches workshops on color and design in Fairfield to Iowa quilt enthusiasts.

WHETHER we are archivists or curators, local historians or family genealogists, scholars or consumers of public history, we make decisions daily that influence how we view ourselves as a people. We may work from the perspective of the past or as contemporary beings who create and share tangible and intangible forms of culture.

The folk artists featured on these pages invent and fabricate things unique for themselves and their communities. Most often, they do not consider themselves artists. They create fantastic and beautiful objects to make personal their homes, or fantastic and beautiful sounds and movements to make personal their time on earth. As students, keepers, watchers, and interpreters of culture, we can take the same approach to making personal a future generation's understanding of the past and present.

In times of tight budgets, our society talks of tourism and economic impact. We award and receive funds based on sound fiscal management and institutional long-range plans. We congratulate ourselves in terms of numbers, black ink, growth. Perhaps we should also speak of human beings, belief, creation, and love. I hope that we have not allowed ourselves to be dominated by our structures more than by our passions — the reasons we are attracted to history and cultural behavior in the first place. Yet, in another sense our organizations are themselves works of art, beautiful things fashioned out of love and creative, playful thinking by board and staff, and tempered by public need and response.

We speak of quality, and should remember that the path to quality is synergistic — drawing from many cultures. Perhaps a useful description of quality is respect for human beings, and therefore respect for the things

human beings have left behind that now fill our archival boxes and shelves, and the things they create today that form our children's legacy.

I am also realizing that restrictive cultural definitions and boundaries need not be reinforced. In my mind, for instance, fine art and folk art are not diametrically opposed, but are complementary and supportive ends of a single spectrum of human creation. This same paradigm can work for a building, an artifact, for any creation that has sprung from the human and natural environments.

Through our work we can vigorously combat the perception that cultural aspects of our communities are generic or homogenized. Iowa is an ethnographic crossroads, a cultural conduit. This can be seen, felt, heard, tasted — experienced by all of the senses. In southern Iowa, Ozark mountain fiddle tunes and vaudeville skits persist along the Iowa-Missouri border. Near the Iowa-Minnesota border, we hear Norwegian fiddle tunes and ballads. As we travel west, we see the bibbed overalls and work boots of eastern Iowans give way to the stetson hats of the cowboy who has just competed in the annual rodeo at Sidney. We taste Thai and Vietnamese food in Des Moines and East Indian dishes in Fairfield — to name but a few foods.

Let us not succumb completely to the long-range plan, the balance sheet, or worst of all, the gloppy, melting-potted cultural construct, which, like that awful green molded jello that we've all eaten at Sunday Iowa picnics, would render Iowa culture — its historic artifacts, documents, and records — an indiscernible mass of homogenized sameness. Rather, it is the distinct pleasure of our vocations and avocations, then, to ensure that all the fine spices of our culture are collected, interpreted, catalogued, and celebrated. □