

Wisconsin Folklife

Wisconsin lies in the heart of a distinctive American region, the Upper Midwest. It is a place where a unique way of life has developed, little noticed elsewhere but markedly shaped by the state's diverse population and striking natural environment. Moreover, concepts concerning civic participation and land stewardship brought by the European immigrants who settled in Wisconsin during the 19th century have deeply influenced social, cultural, economic, and ecological activity in the state, making an impact on the state's folklife.

The climate, geography, and economy of Wisconsin have shaped many shared regional traditions. The abundant timber of Wisconsin's forests is the basis for timber-harvesting folklife as well as vital woodworking traditions. Wisconsin's inland "seashores" on Lakes Superior and Michigan and the thousands of lakes dotting Wisconsin's glacial landscape have stimulated nautical pursuits like boatbuilding and myriad fishing traditions. The central North American climate with its hot summers and cold winters has produced an annual cycle of activities suited to the changing seasons. Wisconsinites tap maple trees, pick mushrooms, and dip smelt in the spring; cut hay, pick cherries, and welcome tourists to lakeside resorts in summer; harvest corn and cranberries and hunt geese and deer in the fall. There is an intense concentration of festive community events crowding Wisconsin's warmer months, but Wisconsinites' famed propensity for partying also defies the cold. Wisconsinites celebrate winter carnivals, compete in ski races and ice fishing tournaments, and turn the parking lot of Lambeau Field into a cold-weather Mardi Gras for every Green

Bay Packers home game.

Nicknamed America's Dairyland, much of the southern two-thirds of Wisconsin's rolling landscape is dominated by family dairy farms. During the mid-19th century, dairy farmers from upstate New York and Central Europe established an enduring agricultural practice suited to

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Wisconsin's land and climate. Dairy farmers typically provide much of their own hay and corn to nourish the dairy herds. The cattle also generate other by-products such as meat, leather, and fertilizer. A large majority of the milk produced in Wisconsin is processed into 250

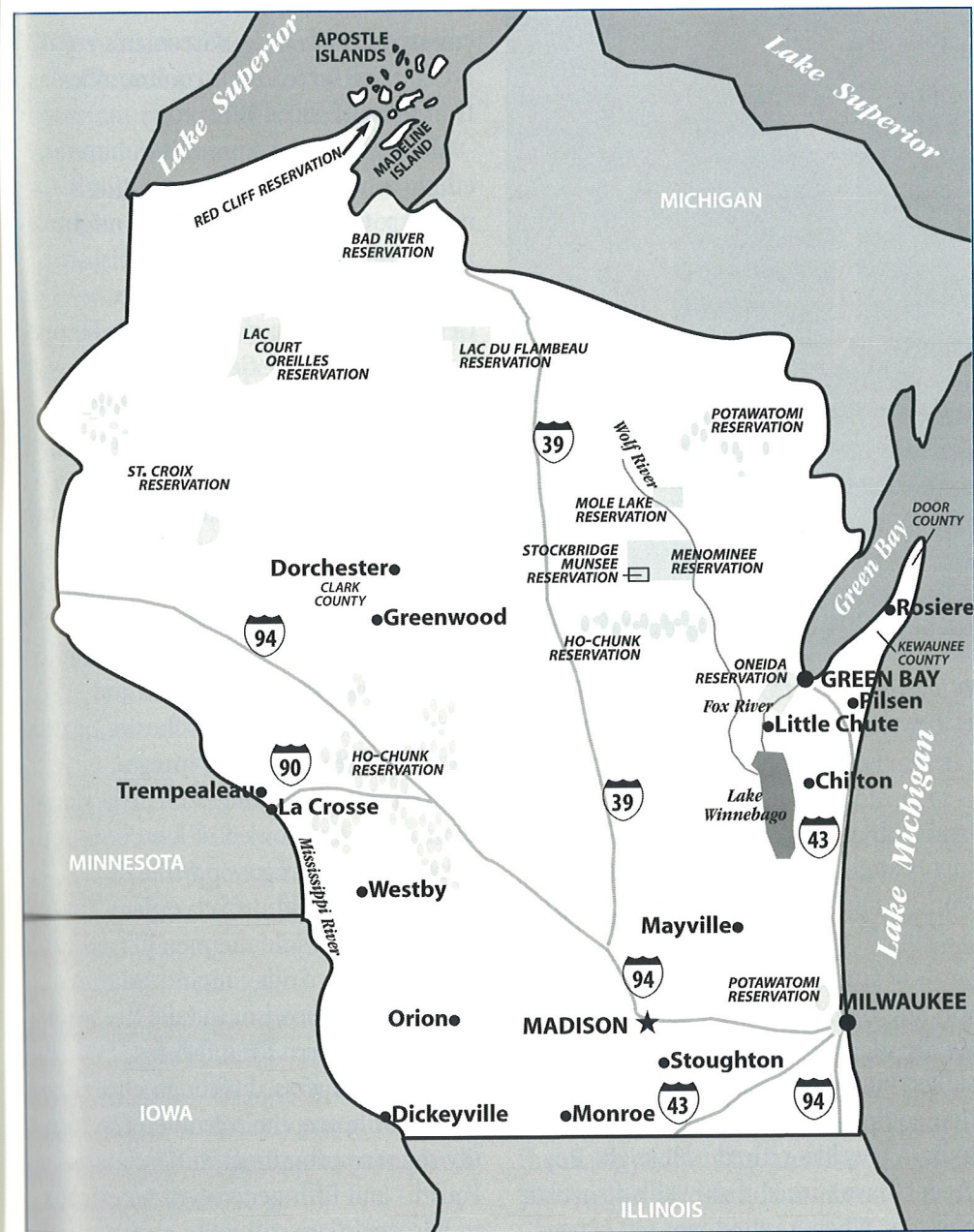
Richard March

varieties of cheese in the many cheese factories in small and large towns throughout the state. Wisconsin produces 30 percent of the cheese in the United States, using cheese-making skills and practices that have evolved from Old World traditions. Today even the whey is processed into valuable lactose and protein products.

The land-use pattern associated with dairy farming contributes to the striking beauty of Wisconsin's landscape. Neat farmsteads dominated by huge barns and towering silos are surrounded by corn and alfalfa fields and pastures. Dairy farmers also tend to preserve some woodlands on their farms to meet timber needs and to provide habitat for the deer which are hunted in the fall for venison.

It is also significant that family dairy farms have contributed to community stability and the persistence of traditions. In hundreds of Wisconsin communities, the family names in the current telephone directory match those on the old headstones in the cemetery. Descendants of 19th-century settlers make up much of the populace in Wisconsin towns, often lending them an ethnic identity. It is well known that Westby is Norwegian, Pilsen is Czech, Rosiere is Belgian, Mayville is German, Monroe is Swiss, and Little Chute is Dutch. People of Northern and Central European origins have been the most numerous, but the Wisconsin cultural mixture is enriched by immigrants from all around the world.

The Wisconsin program is made possible by and is produced in cooperation with the Wisconsin Arts Board and the Wisconsin Sesquicentennial Commission on the occasion of Wisconsin's 150th anniversary of statehood. Wisconsin corporate contributors include AT&T, SC Johnson Wax, and The Credit Unions of Wisconsin.



The governance of Wisconsin towns and cities is in the hands of an active citizenry. The mid-19th-century antimanagerial revolutions in Central Europe produced ideas about a just and participatory society that were very much on the minds of many immigrants to Wisconsin, especially those from the ranks of the German "Forty-eighters." Examples of their legacy are still found in local control of infrastructure, in rural township government, and in a history of pioneering efforts toward industrial democracy.

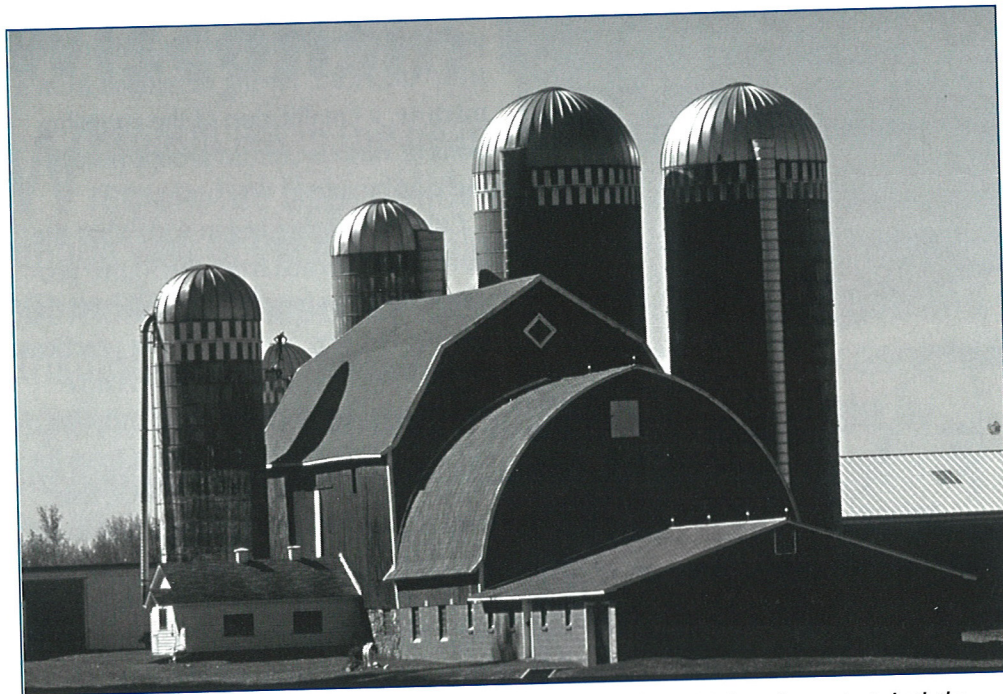
In these stable and participatory communities, the varied traditions of the people who have made the state their home have influenced one another. The Belgians of southern Door County have embraced the brass-band dance music of their Czech neighbors in Kewaunee County, while the Czech Catholic parish picnics in the area serve up the Belgians' booyah soup from 60-gallon cauldrons. Some Old World folkways like the making of Norwegian Hardanger fiddles and the weaving of Latvian sashes have been preserved or revived. Other traditions like

polka music and dancing or quilting are truly American, having developed from a mixture, a creolization of the contributions of various culture groups now living side by side in Wisconsin.

Cultural sharing began with what the Europeans learned from the Native peoples. European immigrants observed the fishing, hunting, and gathering practices of the Woodland Indian tribes. Native practices influenced the way European immigrants began to tap maple trees for sugar, to gather and use wild rice, fish for walleyes and muskellunge, and hunt deer. For example, 19th-century German-American farmers in the Lake Winnebago area observed indigenous Ho-Chunk fishermen spearing sturgeon through the February ice and took up the practice themselves. Today the descendants of those immigrants and other Wisconsinites assemble a temporary village of some 3,000–4,000 ice fishing shanties on Lake Winnebago. Inside the shanties, with spears at the ready, these fishermen peer into the greenish water, some listening to polkas on AM radio from nearby Chilton, others sipping homemade honey wine made from Wisconsin wild grapes and an Old World recipe, all hoping and waiting for the rare moment when a monstrous five- to eight-foot sturgeon might come nosing around their submerged decoy.

At the end of the 19th and through the 20th century, arrivals of Southern and Eastern Europeans, African Americans from the South, Asians, and Latinos have enriched the cultural landscape. The most numerous Eastern Europeans are Polish Americans, who have substantial communities in Wisconsin's industrial towns. Milwaukee's south side with landmarks like the St. Josephat basilica and the shrine to St. Mary Czestohowa at St. Stanislaus Church is the state's largest "Polonia" (the nickname for a compact Polish-American neighborhood). Polish

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The gambrel-roofed barn, gothic-roofed barn, and pole barn (from left) on this farm demonstrate both the change in style and continued usefulness of older structures. As farms grow and change, barns are added, not replaced. Photo © Bob Rashid

traditional foods like *pierogi* and *czarnina* are prepared in homes and neighborhood restaurants. Polish religious and social customs are actively pursued in numerous Polish lodges, social clubs, soccer teams, choirs, and folk dance groups. Polish handicrafts are practiced by artisans like Bernice Jendrzejczak, a maker of *wycinanki* (paper-cut art).

Milwaukee's large African-American community boasts a strong tradition of gospel music, and traditional crafts like quilting and doll-making persist. The Queens of Harmony sing a capella gospel in a very traditional style. Velma Seales and Blanche Shankle are active in a Milwaukee women's quilt group. George McCormick carves and dresses wooden dolls, while Mary Leazer's making of traditional rag dolls has drawn her husband, George Leazer, into the creation of dioramas comprised of his handmade clay dolls arranged to depict African-American social customs.

While earlier immigrants came to farm, cut timber, or mine ores, the indus-

trial cities of southeastern Wisconsin increasingly attracted new arrivals to work in factories, mills, foundries, and packing houses, on the docks and shipyards of Great Lakes ports, and in railway shops and roundhouses. Today southeastern Wisconsin abounds with skilled machinists who create construction equipment, farm implements, and tools. A few, like retired millwright Roy Treder, have turned these skills to artistic pursuits. When a retirement gift is needed for a fellow worker at Milwaukee's Harley-Davidson motorcycle factory, Roy welds together an elaborate base for a clock or lamp from tools and machinery parts symbolic of the worker's career. Roy has created more than 200 retirement gift sculptures for his fellow employees.

Wisconsin's industrial towns and cities are a patchwork of urban ethnic villages, neighborhoods comprised of blocks of well-kept, modest frame houses with churches and taverns on the street corners. The church basement and the corner bar, much like the churches and

crossroads taverns in Wisconsin's rural areas, have served their communities as twin hubs of social life.

Many religious communities have an ethnic aspect to their congregation's makeup. One Lutheran church might attract primarily Norwegian parishioners, while another appeals to Germans. Catholic churches may be predominantly Polish, German, Irish, Mexican, Italian, Croatian, or Slovak. Services may be offered in the language of the old homeland as well as in English. Ethnic crafts and foodways may be practiced in women's clubs and altar societies associated with the church.

Not necessarily conflicting with church life, taverns in Wisconsin serve as another venue for expressing ethnic and regional traditions. In Wisconsin, taverns have a generally positive image. Austrian-American singer Elfrieda Haese remembers the women of her community catching up on gossip while doing knitting in a booth in Schaepler's Tavern in Milwaukee while the men played cards or sang. It is a Friday-night tradition throughout Wisconsin to take the whole family to a tavern for a fish fry.

Whether expressed through church, tavern, or home, the role of ethnic identity remains prominent in Wisconsin. Fourth- and fifth-generation Americans in Wisconsin are still quite cognizant of their ethnic origins, as pure or as varied as they may be. It is very common in Wisconsin to be asked when first meeting someone the ethnic provenance of one's last name. Not only are there recent immigrants who speak Spanish, Laotian, or Hmong, but German, Polish, Norwegian, and the Walloon dialect of French are still spoken in some Wisconsin homes by families whose forbears immigrated generations ago. In folk dance groups and ethnic orchestras, ethnic identity is taught to Wisconsin children, an important reason why eth-

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nicity remains so pervasive in the state.

Traditional arts are one of the most important markers of ethnic identity. Norwegian Americans have placed great emphasis upon crafts like rosemaling, acanthus-carving, and Hardanger fiddle-making. Among the Slavic nationalities in Wisconsin, Ukrainians make *pysanki* Easter eggs and cross-stitch embroidery, Poles *wycinanki* paper-cut art, and Slovaks wheat weavings; Serbians play the one-stringed *gusle*, Slovenians the diatonic button accordion, and Croatians the lute-like *tamburitza*.

In many ethnic groups, the craft item may be created primarily for display in the home, to indicate to all who see it that the owner is a proud bearer of a venerable heritage. But in other instances crafts may have retained their pragmatic purpose in a traditional pursuit as well. Wisconsinites like Mary Lou Schneider and Willi Kruschinski ponder long and hard how to design the perfect fishing lure to catch a particular type of game fish. The ice-fishing decoys in the shape of minnows made by members of the Lac du Flambeau band of Ojibwe may serve both practical and ethnic display purposes. Today decoy carvers like Brooks Big John make some purely decorative decoys, attached perhaps to pieces

of driftwood or to lamp bases, but Brooks also carves less decorated decoys that are carefully weighted and fitted with tin fins so that they will "swim" realistically in the water when he is ice fishing. To fishermen like Brooks, it is the whole tradition involving the decoy that matters — knowing a good spot to catch walleyes or muskies in winter, making the hole through the ice, constructing the dark house tepee, and actually landing a big fish for his family's dinner table.

Wisconsin folklife continues to evolve and to be enriched by new immigration. Refugees from wars and political oppression continue to find a haven in the state. Wisconsin now has America's second largest population of Hmong, Southeast Asian refugees who actively pursue their unique music, craft, and social customs in the new homeland, as well as one of the major settlements of Tibetans. Latino populations in the state have increased markedly in recent decades, the largest being of Mexican origin.

The Wisconsin program at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C., and its restaging in Madison as the Wisconsin Folklife Festival are auspicious events to honor the many people who preserve Wisconsin's folklife and to observe

Wisconsin's sesquicentennial of statehood. It is a challenging task to represent the folklife of the five million residents of Wisconsin in a single event involving only ten or twelve dozen people. The program participants are all outstanding bearers of traditions significant in Wisconsin, all evidence of the natural, cultural, and historical forces that have molded Wisconsin's unique and vital folklife.

Suggested Reading

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Teske, Robert T., ed. *Wisconsin Folk Art: A Sesquicentennial Celebration*. Cedarburg: Cedarburg Cultural Center, 1997.

Woodward, David, et al. *Cultural Map of Wisconsin*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996.

Richard March has been the folk arts specialist for the Wisconsin Arts Board since 1983. Since 1986 he has been the producer and on-air host of "Down Home Dairyland," a program featuring the traditional and ethnic music of the Midwest on Wisconsin Public Radio. He is active as a polka musician, playing button accordion in the Down Home Dairyland Band.



Tibetans, like these women at a Buddhist ceremony in Dunn, constitute one of the newest immigrant communities in Wisconsin. Photo © Bob Rashid