

Michael & Carrie Kline

Professional folklorists Michael and Carrie Kline spent months traversing Schuylkill County, gathering stories for the Ethnic Heritage Study featured here. Their ultimate conclusion: Schuylkill County is like no place they've ever been.

Now, how can we capitalize on that fact and attract heritage and cultural tourism dollars to our colorful Coal Region?



What is folklife, folk art?

Modern audiences may assume that folklife has to do with other times and places, the curious ways of exotic peoples in third world settings. The truth is that folklife bubbles up all around us, no matter who we are, in the beliefs and practices we carry forward from earlier generations, the songs and dances that enrich our celebrations, the recipes handed down from grandmothers, religious icons in our homes, and jokes we tell. Our folklife is our second nature, our “cultural baggage,” the shadow of the past that dogs our every step. It is the lost arts of past industrial eras, the signs by which our grandparents planted. All these intangible qualities which symbolize the meaning of our lives and relationship to past and place are the sum total of who we are and what we like and don't like. Our ethnic heritage is at the source of our vitality and creativity. Visitors “looking in” on our county may find Schuylkill ways fascinating, genuine, and authentic, especially as we figure out how to interpret and present our traditions in venues accessible to tourists.

How can we use our wealth of ethnic heritage to our economic advantage?

We Schuylkill Countians can position ourselves to take more of a hand in shaping our own destinies and local economies by com-

ing together to reclaim our common ground through a process of multi-cultural appreciation and collaboration. By bringing more of an ethnic heritage focus to the County's nascent tourist industry, for example, we can become active in shaping a local tourist economy, broadening its base, so that local residents can reap more of the harvest. We can capitalize on our legacy of Old World hospitality to take more active roles in building and hosting an infrastructure of cultural tourism offerings and interpretation unrivaled in the coalfields. In study groups, committees, and classrooms, we must tackle the heady issues of tourism science, theory, and practice if we are ever to have solid success in this area. We need to build a degree of local autonomy that will broaden the base of what appears to be an emerging tourist economy. It will remain a major challenge for us if we decide to take it on.

Where do we start?

Begin by organizing inter-borough activities that will forge working friendships and build an atmosphere of trust and collaboration both north and south of Broad Mountain. Get the kids involved. Build intergenerational connections that will engage our young people in restructuring the economy and revitalizing local life and values. Participate both in telling the stories of Schuylkill County and in gathering its stories. If the content of this exhibit is any indication, these stories and perspectives need to be told, heard, and gathered. We must organize and render them as texts for our children and future generations. We need to look to all corners of the county in piecing together a broad base of truths. That doesn't mean that everyone has to agree. Life's not like that. But by listening to all the perspectives, we cultivate local autonomy and begin a collective process of assessing the past. An important first step in County-wide healing and redevelopment is setting

the story straight about the history and ecology of our surrounding communities and landscapes. Cultural affirmation, preserving a sense of place, listening to those voices not usually heard in public dialogue, are all sources of empowerment for people who see themselves as average—and powerless—which is most of us.

What is Schuylkill County lacking?

Schuylkill County has an amazing wealth of cultural and ethnically diverse attractions, varied landscapes and beautiful rivers—and a story that will keep visitors coming back for more. What's lacking is the experience of working in a collaborative, entrepreneurial way across ethnic and community lines to achieve broadly based goals. Learning to listen to one another is crucial to the process of working productively together.

Where does this friction come from?

A widespread lack of trust is in large part a by-product of living for nearly two centuries under the thumb of the coal industry, a management system that traditionally worked against collective initiatives and alternative economies. The paternalism and heavy-handedness of the coal companies in years gone by convinced us over generations that we had to be dependent on them for employment, housing, schooling and groceries. In a company store economy, we all grew “another day older and deeper in debt,” as Tennessee Ernie Ford's song asserts. That's a lot of history to overcome, a complex dynamic to have to change. All of us are deeply affected by traumas of the past, even if we are unclear about the details and don't acknowledge the connections.

Can we really do this?

Remember that our ancestors were undaunted by the challenge of carving new settlements out of an uncharted wilderness. We can be pioneers in a whole new level of cultural and economic development for Schuylkill County, carving out for ourselves an economy that is not dependent on outside ownership and top-down handling. We can work instead toward generating local enterprises based on renewable resources and inclusive management. It takes a lot of hard, well-coordinated effort. It takes reaching out to the other side of the tracks and establishing engagement and trust.

