La Vie Boheme, MO

It is approximately a 17-hour car drive from Booneslick CC to Brooklyn, New York. The 1100 miles between the two places reflect the substantial cultural divide between the urban east and rural Midwest. But you'd be mistaken if you thought that the landscape was only good for growing crops. It is a fertile land for bohemians.

John Hartford comes to mind as one patron saint of the Missouri bohemian. Hartford was born in New York City and moved to St. Louis as a boy where he became enthralled with the Mississippi River. He studied its lore and the music it inspired. Glen Campbell had a monster hit with the Hartford-penned song, "Gentle on My Mind," which has been recorded by hundreds of artists.

The royalties from "Gentle on My Mind," freed Hartford to do whatever the hell he pleased. That included helping to invent "Newgrass" music, as well as becoming a riverboat captain on the Mississippi. Hartford's life shares some traits with the rural bohemians who have passed through the halls of Booneslick Community College.

As they did for Hartford, the Mississippi and Missouri rivers act as strange attractors to varied flora and fauna, music, folklore, and human character. Mark Twain knew this. The rivers' Hericlitan flow reminds us change is the one constant, until there's nothing else to change and heat death takes the universe.

The rivers connect us to history that predates America, and even though they are as much channels as rivers now, a primitive wildness still lurks, and arises during flooding.

The rivers feed the astonishing fecundity of the region, from rich soybean and rice fields, to the thickening green tangle as you near the water. Missouri bohemians draw strength, inspiration, and subject matter from the nature around them. Part of their relationship to nature may be romantic, but it is also a practical relationship.

Once, a poet came to class with his forearm scratched up. "What happened," I asked. "Noodling," he replied. He taught me about catching giant catfish by sticking your arm into their den. When they open their mouth and clamp down, you pull your arm and the catfish out.

Many Missouri bohemians work on farms; their bodies are tempered by hard work outside, and their sensibility is sharpened by this work as well. When I ask them what's going on in the line from Hopkins's poem, "The Windhover," "shéer plód makes plough down sillion/Shine," they first ask me what "sillion" means—it's a row of plowed dirt—then they nod. They explain that when you plow a row the newly turned up dirt catches sun differently and shines.

Their recreation takes place outside. They hunt, fish, four wheel, drink beers in hollers, and when there's nothing else to do, drive gravel roads and shoot the breeze.

John Hartford was a practical genius. In addition to captaining a steamboat, he composed songs, played violin and banjo, collected folklore and music history. He rigged up a plywood board and pickup mic so he could clog dance while playing and singing.

My students take whatever class spurs their creativity—they move freely among the visual and dramatic arts, poetry, fiction, and literature, even the occasional welding class—you'll never know when it will come in handy. And it seems most of them play music. There was a time when I looked at the listings of bands playing in the college town of Alexandria and more than half had former students as members.

When I think about the practical genius of the Missouri bohemian I think of my visual artist students who can craft cabinets, poets who can finish concrete, fiction writers who can frame a house, and essayists who can clear a building during urban warfare. When a student asked for an art school letter of recommendation, I wrote in truth, "He can skillfully render the human body in charcoal, plow a straight row after drinking a six-pack, and switch out the transmission of a 1997 Ford Ranger."

For the Missouri bohemian, there's no time for hipster posturing, self-involved preening, or pecking order—There's too much art to make! But they can clear out some time for a bonfire and Natty Lite by the fishing pond and may disappear in early spring, if the moist is right enough to find morel mushrooms.

John Hartford is a folk hero. His boundless generosity was one reason for his outsized presence. He brought people together in the name of the music he loved. He was the host to a genre of musicians.

When word got out that he was nearing the end of his final battle with cancer, musicians from all over the country gathered in shifts on the grounds of his house, on the banks of the Mississippi in Nashville. They sent him off to bluegrass heaven with tunes.

The creative generosity of my students has inspired me. They don't compete, but collaborate. Perhaps it's because they may have found themselves marginalized in their formative years because of their artistic inclination. As rich as the creative environment is in central Missouri, it also breeds a mindset where the phrase, "that's different," is used as a pejorative epithet. Of course there is no beauty without difference.

So they find each other at Booneslick CC and create an artistic community there. Because collaboration was a central part of my artistic upbringing in Chicago in the 1980s as part of the Chicago Poetry Ensemble and Poetry Slam, I assist wherever possible. Twice a year I produce a poetry show with these students where they display these gifts—they make art to use in film to go along with the poetry that is backed by original music they compose and play.

Their visual art runs the gamut from epic rendering of Missouri creatures like the turkey hawk, possum, and giant white moth to rich portraits. There's printing-making political work, graceful ceramics, and 3-d work in the busy studio space of Booneslick CC. It's worth noting that the art instructors who teach these students carry course-loads of as many as 9 classes a semester, while stretching their own canvases, setting their own plumb lines, and making their own masterpieces.

Student poems are imbued with the place I have grown to love, as are the country songs they write, and the films they make. They are fearless experimenters because, in part, they have no clique to conform to. It's joyful labor to make art—something coming from nothing.

In his prophetic book, *Milton*, William Blake writes, "The Imagination is not a State; it is Human Existence itself." Blake argues that the procreative, synthetic force of the imagination is the energy that brought us into being and sustains us. We become alienated from ourselves and each other when our acts derive from sources like jealousy, greed, and acquisitiveness. Essentially, Blake believes we are creative agents whose

energies are chained by conventional religion, timidity, and restrictive social structures. We are imprisoned artists.

For 22 years I edited a literary magazine of students' work, *The Anvil & lyre*. If you finished a creative writing class, you had your work published. Much of the literary world is about exclusion, as if writers care more about gatekeeping than the work itself. My policy of inclusion rested on the Blakean assumption that we all contain artistic energy waiting to be released. If you visited the Missouri State Historical Society and perused the 22 volumes of *The Anvil & lyre*, I believe you agree with Blake—if you give people a space in which to be creative, they will fill it with their beauty.

And if they venture to the coast to make their way in the world do you have any advice for them?

"Only one thing: If you move to New York City and make the big time in the Big Apple, when you get interviewed, please please please don't say you're from Brooklyn—tell them you're from Missouri."