

Mandolin Player Works Hard, Has Fun

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It may borderline on obsessive, but Jim Versch of Marion has a passion for string band music. The fact that he needs nine mandolins, a tenor banjo, a four-string Dobro, a guitar, and an octave mandolin to make music is just evidence that he likes to do his job well.

The former longtime Marion High School art teacher and volleyball coach continues to follow a motivational credo of “hard work pays off, but have fun while doing it,” in his position as a new member of the Tallgrass Express String Band.

“We are so happy to have Jim in the group,” said bandleader Annie Wilson, who was named “Flint Hills Balladeer” on Jan. 11 by Governor Sam Brownback. “He stepped right in to take the place of Loren Ratzloff who played the banjo, and is doing such a good job.”



Wilson said she and other band members noticed Versch’s abilities to work in a group and attribute that to volleyball coaching leadership in his past.

“He is just a kind and generous person that gets along with people so well,” Wilson said. “He knows so much about music and the history behind it. He really has a style all his own that we like.”

Versch said joining an established band was not all fun and games, but it was something with which he had experience.

“I am replacing a very talented musician and filling his shoes has been a real challenge,” Versch said. “The band has been very patient and encouraging but I can’t always get my fingers to do what I want them to.”

Versch said he played in many bands since picking up the mandolin his junior year in high school. He formed an Irish band in Lincoln, Neb. while in high school, called Paddywhack, then he joined “The Prairie Dawgs” and the “Boys from Bluehill” before moving to Marion. Once in Marion County, he joined various pickers like “The Marion County Boys” which became “Lakeshore Unlimited.” He also played with “The Prairie Goose Stompers” which included a ragtime piano player, a cello player, and himself.

“I like all kinds of music,” Versch said. “What I like best about Tallgrass (his newest band) is the original songs by Annie (Wilson — guitar), Carl Reed (bass and guitar), and Charlie Laughridge (fiddle and mandolin). The stories in these tunes are wonderful, comfortable, and fun. We also do a bunch of more obscure instrumentals, which I really like, though they are a challenge to learn because they are unique.”

Versch said weekly band practice is necessary because the group has 10 to 15 concerts scheduled for the year already.

“We travel all over Kansas, and are going to Beatrice, Neb., June 14 and 15,” he said.

Wilson said that most performances are for private parties or groups, such as fundraising dinner concerts or dude ranch reunions, but some were open to the public.

Though he is retired from teaching and coaching and said he missed the interaction with other teachers and students, Versch said he really enjoyed being able to fill his free time with music. He works regular hours in McPherson as a sign builder.

“Life is what you make it,” he said. “It’s better to be absolutely ridiculous than absolutely boring.”

Wilson said members of the Tallgrass Express String Band will soon be recording another CD of original Flint Hill’s songs. Versch’s mandolin-playing style will likely be an important part of the group’s success.