

Folklife in Oklahoma

by Guy Logsdon

Guy Logsdon has been a collector and student of American folklore and music. He is presently Professor of American Culture and Folklife at the University of Tulsa, having received his Ph.D. from the University of Oklahoma.

The strength of folklife in Oklahoma stems from contrasts in the state's landscape and diversity of its cultures. Northeastern Oklahoma enjoys the physical and cultural characteristics of the Ozark Mountain region; southeastern Oklahoma, with rainfall similar to the humid gulf region, exhibits strong southern and Texas cultural influences – in fact, it is traditionally referred to as “Little Dixie.” By contrast, in northwestern Oklahoma, where the terrain rises to nearly 5,000 feet and is the heart of the high southern Plains wheat belt region, the sparse populace shows a strong Kansas-Plains cultural influence. Southwestern Oklahoma is similar to West Texas in climate, terrain, and culture; cattle, horses, cotton, and wheat dominate the lives of the people. And the central region of the state is an amalgam of the others.

As the last state in the nation to be opened to white settlement, non-Indian traditions were late in arriving. Nevertheless, in eastern and southern Oklahoma where the Five Civilized Tribes – Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks and Seminoles – were settled, there was already much southern culture, for these tribes for decades had intermarried with non-Indians in the Southeast. Because of this, conflicts, both political and cultural, between fullblood and blooded citizens in each of the nations were common.

The original settlers in the area now Oklahoma were the Osages, Quapaws, Caddos, Pawnees, Wichitas, Comanches, and Kiowas, but in the 1820s as the Indian removal from the South became the national goal, the Five Civilized Tribes were forcibly marched to “Indian Territory.” During the next fifty years, additional tribes were removed to the Territory until today over fifty-five tribes are represented within the state. While some cultural patterns are common to all tribes, each has its own distinctive traditions. Thus, within its American Indian culture alone, Oklahoma has a diversity in language and folklife similar to that of Europe.

In non-Indian culture Oklahoma is a late-comer. White settlement did not start until 1889 with the first land run, and for the next fifteen years additional Indian lands were opened through other land runs, lotteries, and allotments. During this time, as the nation strived to be the “melting pot” of the world, Oklahoma became the melting pot of the nation. Because it offered free farm land for many new European immigrants, more people moved into Oklahoma in a shorter period of time than any other migration in American history. Also, mining – particularly coal mining – was developed by Indians in the eastern Territory, which attracted many Italian, as well as Mexican and Welsh immigrants, to the new coal fields, and communities that were predominantly Italian grew up around them. Other communities predominantly of one ethnic group, such as Polish, German, Russian-German, and Czechoslovakian, were established in the free land areas of central and western Oklahoma, and their Old World traditions continue to flourish. However, while Mexican-Americans today constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in the state, no specifically Mexican communities emerged from their influx. This is due in part to the nature of the work that attracted them: with the exception of coal mining, their work was migratory, i.e., as agriculture and railroad laborers. Still, through the years, large Mexican-American settlements have grown in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, and the popularity of their foods has attracted families to most communities of significant size in the state. In fact, the demand is so great that small companies making tortillas and corn chips have been established to serve the numerous family-owned restaurants.

Next to Anglo, Mexican, and Indian cultures, Blacks compose the largest ethnic group, but even some Black traditions were transported to Oklahoma by Indians. Many citizens of the Five Civilized Tribes were plantation slave holders in their southern homes, and when they were removed to Indian Territory, they took their cotton farming traditions and slaves with them. In fact, some of the most popular Black spirituals were composed by two slaves of the

Choctaws – Uncle Wallace Willis and his wife Aunt Minerva. In the late 1840s a missionary to the Choctaws, Reverend Alexander Reid, heard them singing as they worked in the cotton fields and put the words and melodies on paper for “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” “Steal Away to Jesus,” and a few other spirituals. In the late 1860s he taught them to the Fisk Jubilee Singers who, in turn, made them famous.

When the Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves of the Indians, they became known as Indian Freedmen and congregated into all-Black settlements. Later, a movement was started to make Oklahoma an all-Black state. Also, for two years, starting in 1912, the “Chief Sam Movement” called Blacks to Oklahoma from where they would depart to start their migration to Liberia. Both movements failed but brought a great influx of Blacks to the state, and approximately twenty-three all-Black communities were established. But the oldest Black traditions – particularly foodways – are still practiced among the descendants of Indian Freedmen: wild onions and eggs, sofkey – a traditional drink with various other names, Indian breads, and other foods are as traditional with Oklahoman Blacks as they are with Native Americans.

Music has played a strong role in all areas of Oklahoma folklife. American Indian music for entertainment and ritual can be heard throughout the state. Black music, particularly the blues, has been strong; the original “Howling Wolf,” or Funny Papa Smith, was living in southwestern Oklahoma when he was recorded in the early 30s. But when the dance band became the predominant influence, such legendary musicians as Charlie Christian and Jimmy Rushing from the Black blues tradition left Oklahoma for big band careers. Those who stayed in Oklahoma joined local dance bands.

Oklahoma may, in fact, be the “dancingest” state of the country. Although Oklahoma is often referred to as the “buckle on the Bible Belt,” nevertheless its dance halls are filled on Saturday nights. While there are not as many dance halls as there are churches, places where Saturday night dances are held can be found in communities of all sizes as well as in the country, miles from the nearest town. For the most part, their crowd capacity is from 500 to 2,500 dancers for ballroom or couple dancing. The most popular music is western swing, but the ethnic background determines the music. There are, for example, numerous Czech Halls in Central Oklahoma where older Czech dance music is mixed with swing tunes.

Not all music is secular, for gospel is also very much alive. The tradition of shape-note singing was first introduced among the Five Civilized Tribes and taught to the Indian Freedmen. Shape-note singing became widespread among Christians, and, as whites settled in the state, the singing schools expanded. Singing conventions, fifth-Sunday singings, and all-night singings were common and often featured family groups or Indian quartets. The song books – still in use – were published by Vaughn and Stamps-Baxter. These books are used by the New-Harmony Singing Convention that has its roots in Indian Freedmen history. But many Blacks brought singing traditions from other states. When an Oklahoma Black blues man is “called by God,” he puts aside the blues forever and uses his voice as an instrument of worship. Thus for decades in Oklahoma, both the church and the dance hall have been the core of an individual’s social life; they became the two dominant cultural influences.

Fiddle music is widespread and its various styles reflect the state’s diversification. Western swing and dance music developed into what is often referred to as the Texas-Oklahoma style, in which a “breakdown” is slowed and the full bow is used; still, a hybrid Oklahoma fiddler has the ability to play almost any style. The guitar is the most popular instrument for rhythm in the dance bands, and open chord guitar style is still used for backing up fiddlers. The banjo was not widely used until recently.

Western swing music is the outgrowth of ranch house dances, which accompanied the development of the livestock industry. It is particularly popular in western Oklahoma, where cattle trails and grazing lands leased from Indians produced a major cattle-horse culture. As the industry spread statewide, the folklife of cowboys and rodeo hands became widely known and popularized.

Houses and barns are as varied as the landscape. The oldest known house is a log cabin, but sod houses were also once common in northwestern Oklahoma. In Osage County, large native sandstone houses, many of which are still occupied, were popular prior to statehood. Houses made of rocks gathered on the owner's property may still be seen, and the oil camp "shotgun shack" was common. Some petroleum companies provide housing for their less transitory employees.

The folklore of the petroleum industry is ripe for study since little collecting of data has been done. Few studies other than historical ones have been made. One explanation for this may be that the migration to Oklahoma has, until recent years, been based on "boom or bust" economics – land, wheat, oil, and cattle. Those who could not make it moved on to another boom attraction, while those who stayed were too busy to reflect on their lives. With a more stable population and a greater sense of pride and heritage, interest in Oklahoman folklife is growing.