

Florida Parishes

by Joel Gardner

Joel Gardner is Assistant Director of the Louisiana Division of the Arts. Previously he directed the Florida Parishes Folklife Survey under a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. He has been an oral historian for nearly 15 years and holds degrees from Tulane University and the University of California, Los Angeles.

This article is based on the Florida Parishes Folklife Survey, conducted in 1983-84, the results of which will appear in *Folklife in the Florida Parishes*, scheduled for publication this fall.

A parish is Louisiana's equivalent to a county; eight of them are collectively referred to as the "Florida Parishes:" East and West Feliciana, East Baton Rouge, Livingston, St. Helena, St. Tammany, Tangipahoa, and Washington. They are bounded by the state of Mississippi to the north and east, by the Mississippi River to the west, and by Bayou Manchac and Lake Pontchartrain to the south (see map). In colonial days, they fell within the Spanish Territory of West Florida, and for a few months in 1910, before annexation into the United States, they were the Republic of West Florida, hence their present designation, Florida Parishes.

The Florida Parishes region encapsulates the diversity of the state as a whole. Its residents are Scotch-Irish-English and Afro-American, French and Creole, Italian and Eastern European. Unlike the rest of south Louisiana, however, the Florida Parishes have seen very little creolization; rather, the traditions and ethnicity of its people have remained more discrete. The folk landscape of the parishes today includes plantation homes, piney woods, farmsteads, bayou fishing camps, Creole cottages and Sunbelt subdivisions. Considering the suburban infringement of the metropolitan Baton Rouge and New Orleans areas, the region is remarkably rich in rural traditional culture.

The major migration to the Florida Parishes was by British Americans in the 19th century. Tidewater English from Virginia and the Carolinas settled the cotton plantations of the Felicianas, and Scotch-Irish moved into the piney woods of Washington, St. Helena, and Tangipahoa by way of the mid-south areas of Georgia and Mississippi.

In front of the Anglo planters and farmers moved the Acolapissa, the major Native American group of the presettlement era — some now mixed with the Houmas in the Terrebonne Parish to the southwest — and the Choctaw, a few of whom remain along the bayous of the north-shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Behind the planters came the African slaves, who later became sharecroppers when the postbellum cotton economy dwindled. In the meantime, French, Spanish and German settlers moved in from New Orleans to the south to fish and hunt around the lake and rivers, as did the Creoles of Color (free men of color), who made homes in St. Tammany Parish and intermixed with the Europeans and the Indians.

At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, the last to arrive were Italians — nearly all of them Sicilians — and Hungarians. Each group formed a community, in Tangipahoa and Livingston parishes respectively, that remains culturally cohesive today (see map).

The extent to which all these ethnic groups have maintained customs from generation to generation has depended on the economic or

social isolation chosen by or forced upon the group. Thus Blacks, restricted from integration into the social structure of the dominant class, maintain traditions of subsistence and sustenance, worship and recreation that are characteristic of the deep South. Their domestic folkways, such as food gathering and preparation, are those practiced by their forebears. For example, for the older generation of Blacks today, quilting is an aesthetic and social activity, learned from parents and grandparents. (By contrast, Anglo quilters have tended to adopt styles and patterns from crafts books and national magazines rather than from oral tradition.) Music plays a pervasive role for the Blacks of the Florida Parishes, from the gospel music sung in church every Sunday to the blues played at backyard barbecues and in clubs. Baton Rouge has recently resurfaced as a center of the blues; the home of such nationally known performers as the late Robert Pete Williams and Slim Harpo now boasts several active blues nightclubs and a style of playing that imparts an urban flavor to a music with country roots. The annual River City Blues Festival in April features bluesmen such as Henry Gray, Silas Hogan, Guitar Kelley and Tabby Thomas.

Like the Blacks, many piney woods Scotch-Irish retain an economic isolation from Sunbelt growth. In piney woods areas in the northern Florida Parishes, where logging once served as an industry and a way of life, many remain tied to small farms. Most maintain traditional methods of food gathering and preparation, and some practice hand-crafting farm implements, such as axe and hammer handles. The traditional secular music of Florida Parishes Anglos is found from Walker to Bogalusa at public liquor-free clubs, such as the Old South Jamboree and the Catfish Hayloft. Gospel music is equally rich but more pri-

Irene and Curt Blackwell of Covington, St. Tammany Parish, play fiddlesticks and fiddle.
Photo by Nicholas R. Spitzer, courtesy Louisiana Folklife Program





The feeding of the Saints of the Holy family is re-enacted on St. Joseph's Day in Baton Rouge by the Stablier/Landry family. Photo by Maida Bergeron, courtesy Louisiana Folklife Program

vately performed at church functions. Fiddling traditions persist, and some performers still use fiddlesticks for dance pieces, such as "Sawyer Man" and "Pa Didn't Raise No Cotton and Corn."

The traditions of the piney woods area of the Florida Parishes are typically the Upland South culture that dominates north Louisiana. By contrast, the northshore of Lake Pontchartrain is home to a creolized mix of people and customs, comparable to that found throughout the south of the state. Intermingled descendants of Spanish, French and Germans fish and hunt, while creating the tools of their occupation, as families such as Quaves (from Cuevas), Maranges, and Glockners have all adapted their heritage to their surroundings. Lake Pontchartrain has always provided them an abundance of seafood, so fishing has played an important part in Northshore lifestyle. The implements of shrimping and crabbing and sometimes even the tools used to stitch the nets are made by hand.

In Bayou Lacombe, just east of Mandeville, French, Creoles of Color and Choctaws have intermarried over the years. Their most striking tradition is the celebration of All Saints' Day, *Toussaint*, which includes blessing the dead by lighting candles around each gravesite in Lacombe cemeteries. At these rituals, Creole-speaking worshippers with French surnames gather to pay homage to their earliest French ancestors as well as their most recently departed relatives.

The Sicilians of Tangipahoa and East Baton Rouge Parishes, along with those in New Orleans and north Louisiana, observe St. Joseph's Day. The ancestors of most Italians in the Florida Parishes first worked the sugar fields across the Mississippi or the docks in New Orleans, then moved to the Hammond area, where they bought small straw-



French-speaking Choctaw, Leon Laurent of Mandeville, sets a bird trap in his backyard. Photo by Nicholas R. Spitzer, courtesy Louisiana Folklife Program

berry farms. For years the town of Independence was nearly all Sicilian, although today the population is somewhat more heterogeneous. Still, the town focuses on its Sicilian heritage with an Italian festival in April and St. Joseph's Day in March, the latter offering gratitude to this saint for the bounty of the earth. Some families build home altars and invite their neighbors; other worshippers construct an altar at the church and provide a meal for all to share. Following the public display of the altar, a procession honoring St. Joseph winds through town. A smaller percentage of Italian-Americans in Baton Rouge are of Sicilian origin, yet St. Joseph's Day is still the most important Italian-American holiday in that city. The Grandsons of Italy, a fraternal organization, after building an altar that fills the wall of St. Anthony's School gymnasium, feed some 4,000 members of the larger community.

About 30 miles southeast of Independence, the residents of Hungarian Settlement continue the traditions of another European ethnic group. Foodways and dance are Hungarian customs that have resisted assimilation. For example, cabbage rolls are ubiquitous at celebrations, traditional Hungarian songs and dances are still performed and Old World costumes are still made and passed on by men and women.

In the Florida Parishes today, as in the rest of Louisiana, many of the traditions practiced for centuries risk being eclipsed by the spread of the Sunbelt lifestyle. Revivalists learn their crafts from magazines and call themselves folk artists; young people play rock-and-roll instead of blues or bluegrass. Each year, Lake Pontchartrain, flooded with river water to protect low-lying New Orleans, loses more of its former bounty of seafood. Still, an increasing awareness of cultural continuity, especially linked to environmental protection, should assure the survival of the traditional ways of life in the Florida Parishes.

Suggested reading

DeCaro, F. A., and Rosan Jordan. *Louisiana Traditional Crafts*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Union, 1980.

Spitzer, Nicholas R., ed. *Louisiana Folklife: A Guide to the State*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana Folklife Program, (forthcoming).

Folklife in the Florida Parishes. Baton Rouge: Louisiana Folklife Program, 1985.

Suggested recordings

Louisiana Blues (Arhoolie Records 1054).

Bayou Bluegrass (Arhoolie Records 5010).