

Regional Folklife of North Louisiana: A Cultural Patchwork

by Susan Roach-Lankford

Susan Roach-Lankford, a native of Lincoln Parish, has been active in documenting north Louisiana folk traditions since 1978. She has also served as curator of museum exhibitions of quilts and folk arts, has written on regional folklife and quilting and has been a consultant for the Louisiana Folklife Program and for numerous folklife festivals. Currently vice-chairman of the Louisiana Folklife Commission, she is a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of Texas.

Women display a quilt at a north Louisiana community fair in Grambling. Photo by Nicholas R. Spitzer, courtesy Louisiana Folklife Program

Outsiders often stereotype all of Louisiana as “Cajun” swampland; however, a closer look shows that the geography and folklife of the northern part of the state differ considerably from that of south Louisiana. In sharp contrast to the French-dominated culture of south Louisiana, the north is characterized by its Anglo- and Afro-American folk music traditions, such as old-time country string bands and country blues; small farming and such crafts as white-oak basketry; foodways, such as hot water corn bread and butterbeans; and the prevalence of Protestantism. Mapping the cultural differences between north and south Louisiana reveals a rough boundary based on a peculiar complex of geographical, historical and cultural circumstances that continue to distinguish the two areas (see map).

North Louisiana has diverse geographical features, ranging from the lowlands of the Mississippi Delta and the Red River Valley, to the pine hills of the northwestern and central parishes, to the terrace flatwoods of the southwestern parishes. The first Spanish explorers under DeSoto in 1540 found American Indians living mainly in the





Coushatta Indian Lorena Langley weaves pine-straw basketry in her home in Elton.
Photo by Rosan A. Jordan

lowland areas and hunting in the forests. They included people belonging to the Caddoan and Muskogean language families and a number of small, linguistically isolated groups. Their numbers had been greatly reduced by the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, when Indian lands were gradually sold to whites.

Today north Louisiana Indians are mainly descended from the Koasati and Choctaw tribes that migrated into the area after Europeans began settlement. In 1884 the Koasati settled on the border of French Louisiana near Elton in Allen Parish, where they maintain such tribal traditions as their coiled pine straw basketry, their language and racquet games. The Choctaw migrated from Mississippi and settled in central Louisiana. The Jena band in LaSalle Parish continues to speak its native language and to practice such traditional crafts as deer hide-tanning and basketry. Although modern training programs have led many Indians into skilled professions, most remain basically rural farmers, trappers and fishermen.

In addition to Indian and Spanish influences in the area, French colonists led by St. Denis in 1714 established the first permanent settlement in Louisiana on the Red River — Natchitoches. The rich soil of the area and the importation of slaves from the French West Indies in 1716 and from Africa in 1720 provided the basis for the initial cot-

ton and sugar plantation system in the region. The Natchitoches/Cane River area was greatly influenced by the French Creole planters and also by an enclave of *gens de couleur libre* (Creoles of Color) from the Isle Brevelle colony founded by freed slaves. The colony's well-educated members of mixed ethnic origins (French, Spanish, Indian and African) held themselves aloof from the "red-necked Americans" who lived in the less fertile piney woods around the plantations. Many in the Natchitoches area still affiliate with the French Creole heritage, which sets them apart from the rest of north Louisiana. This heritage is expressly marked by French Creole architecture and foodways, such as Cane River cake and Natchitoches meat pies.

Other scattered small communities of non-Anglo Europeans in north Louisiana include Italians in Shreveport and Alexandria, Czechs and Bohemians near Alexandria, Belgians in Many, Spanish at Robeline and around Zwolle and Germans in Webster Parish. Since each of these groups makes up only a tiny fraction of the population of any parish, it is not surprising that most of their Old World traditions have disappeared or merged with the dominant Anglo southern culture. However, today many of these groups are attempting to revive their customs and history.

The Scotch-Irish continue to be the principal shapers of the regional culture of north Louisiana. These Protestant settlers began moving into the area after the Louisiana Purchase, bringing with them their belief in hard work and self-reliance, and their staunch no-nonsense Protestantism, which taught that it was sinful to dance, to play cards, to engage in frivolous pastimes, or to break the Sabbath. This world view, in contrast to more *laissez faire* Catholic attitudes prevalent in south Louisiana, is still apparent in many laws prohibiting alcohol and the sale of merchandise on Sundays.

The religious practices of the Scotch-Irish and the African slaves they brought with them varied according to the different denominations which were, and still are, primarily evangelical Protestant sects (mainly segregated Baptist and Methodist and some Presbyterian). Many community churches in the region still maintain a complex of religious traditions which date back to the days of settlement, such as

Split oak basketmakers Jim and Azzie Roland of Marion show a cross section of their work.
Photo by Susan Roach-Lankford





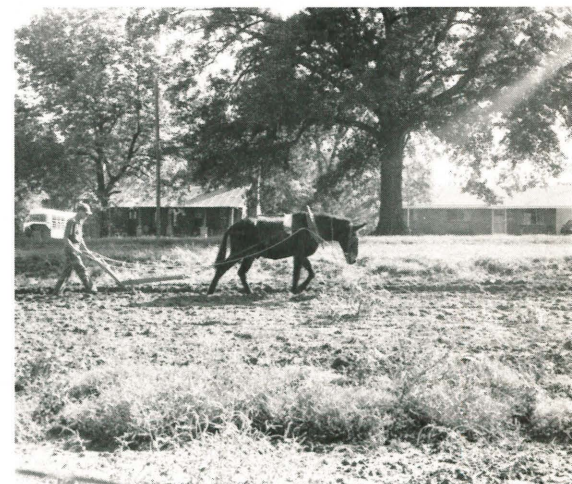
Clonie Otwell of Pearidge Community, Dubach, in front of his double-pen log cabin.
Photo by Susan Roach-Lankford

Sunday afternoon singings and “dinner on the grounds,” family gospel singing, funeral and burial customs and graveyard workings (“memorial days”). Such rituals, together with secular traditions like family reunions, reflect the emphasis on family and religion and maintain the conservative nature of the region. As a woman from the pine woods of Vernon Parish explains: “It was in the family; we just do traditional things. We are hill country people, and we just more or less do things the older ways.”

Socially and philosophically conservative attitudes and slow economic growth of north Louisiana, together with its history of plantations and small farms, have helped to retain its traditional rural nature. The fertility of land helped to create a class system similar to that throughout the antebellum South, for the rich bottomlands were settled by planters with large numbers of slaves. By the early 1800s, with the development of the cotton gin and the steamboat, cotton had become the main crop of the Mississippi Delta and the Red River Valley. After the Civil War many of the plantations and farms of the yeoman slaveholder were divided into tenant farms rented to freed Blacks or poor Anglos. By the 1930s, with the overproduction of cotton and technical advances in farming, sharecropping became obsolete, causing tenants to move to marginal pine-flat lands or to jobs in the cities. Today in the lowland river areas the surviving traditional plantation “I-house,” surrounded by equipment buildings and live oaks, can still be seen in the midst of hundreds of acres of farmland, more often planted in soybeans than in cotton.

The hill country was settled mainly by yeomen farmers with a few slaves and non-slaveholding farmers. They grew cotton to a lesser extent and were more self-sufficient than the planters. Today the rural

Harmon Martin of Pearidge Community, Dubach, plows his garden in front of his neighbors' traditional dogtrot and modern ranch houses. Photo by Susan Roach-Lankford



landscape is marked by small farmsteads with occasional log dogtrot and double-pen folk houses interspersed among the modern ranch style and mobile homes. Other folk architecture types still in use but rarely built today are the frame dogtrots (often with enclosed hallways for efficient heating), bungalows, shotgun houses, barns and other farm-related structures.

While such traditional farming techniques as plowing with mules and planting by the signs are still common, the year-round subsistence farmers have largely been supplanted by truck farmers, who supplement their incomes with work in the oil fields, construction on highways, truck driving or logging. Although many younger people left the farms after World War II, today more are staying in their rural communities, although they may hold jobs in nearby towns. Yet those who do move into urban areas usually maintain rural traditions, such as gardening and folk foodways (see essay by Gutierrez).

A number of farming and domestic craft traditions from the 19th century have also continued among Black and Anglo rural residents of the hills and bottomlands. Craft items may be made for traditional utilitarian purposes or simply for nostalgic reasons. For example, white-oak baskets may be used for gathering the harvest or as living room decor, and quilts may be used either for bed covers or as wall hangings.

Many crafts take advantage of the natural environment and by-products of farm cultivation. The forest provides white-oak for baskets, chair bottoms, fishnet hoops and implement handles; cypress or pine for riving shakes; hickory for whittling plow stocks, walking sticks, bowls, gun stocks and toys. Cultivation provides corn shucks for fashioning dolls or braiding into hats, yokes, and place mats or

Mitchell and Josie Shelton sing gospel to a slide guitar accompaniment for a recording in the North Central Louisiana Folklife Project. Photo by Susan Roach-Lankford





Prizewinners Tex Grimsley of Shreveport and Louis Darby of Opelousas perform at the Louisiana State Fiddle Championship in Boyce. Photo by Al Godoy, courtesy Louisiana Office of Tourism

twisting into rope for chair bottoms and whips. Gourds, which in folk belief keep snakes away, are still grown for bird houses, dippers and storage containers. Fishing, hunting and trapping — still popular traditional pastimes as well as food or income supplements, especially in the swamplands — require craft items such as “John boats,” hoop nets and hunting horns. These endeavors have kept alive the traditions of hide-tanning and trap-building as well.

Traditionally the realm of women, domestic craft production — quilting, tatting, crocheting, hairpin lace and embroidery — has survived more readily than the male counterpart of farm-related crafts. Quiltmaking, the most prevalent craft in the region, is done by Anglos and Blacks in both rural and urban areas. Many traditional patterns are still used, such as the Anglo favorites “Flower Garden” and “Double Wedding Ring” and the Black preferred “strip” or “string” quilt. The traditional “quilting bee,” however, is much less common than in the days when neighbors and family got together for other communal events, such as barn-raising and corn-huskings.

The favorite entertainment for community gatherings in the past was country music, which is still popular today alongside its country-western and bluegrass descendants. Rather than continuing the older work or house parties, today’s north Louisianians go to “country music shows” like Shreveport’s Louisiana Hayride and Shongaloo’s Red Rock Jamboree. One feature of these shows, old-time fiddling, still provides the impetus for fiddle contests in the region, including the State Fiddling Championship at Rebel State Commemorative Area in Natchitoches Parish. Old-time fiddlers also “jam” with other musicians in their homes, playing tunes ranging from traditional breakdowns, waltzes and gospel, to western swing and popular music.

Among area Blacks, the blues tradition continues but is heavily influenced by popular soul music and rock-and-roll. The delta area in the northeast still harbors a strong blues tradition and features bands like Hezekiah and the Houserockers, whose music draws from jazz, minstrelsy and rock-and-roll. Blues traditions also continue among

Robertson family from Luna picks mayhaws in the Ouachita River backwater near Litroe, Union Parish. Photo by Susan Roach-Lankford

Suggested reading

Gregory, H. F., ed. *Doing It Right and Passing It On: North Louisiana Crafts*. Alexandria, Louisiana: Alexandria Museum, 1981.

_____ and Donald W. Hatley, eds. "Split-tin' on the Grain: Folk Art in Clifton, Louisiana." *Louisiana Folklife* 8 (1983):1-20.

Kniffen, Fred. *Louisiana: Its Land and Its People*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1968.

Mills, Gary B. *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977.

Roach-Lankford, Susan, ed. *Gifts from the Hills: North Central Louisiana Folk Traditions*. Ruston: Louisiana Tech Art Gallery, 1984.

Suggested recordings

Cornbread for Your Husband and Biscuits for Your Man: Mr. Clifford Blake, Sr. Calls the Cotton Press (Louisiana Folklife Recording Series, LP-001).

The North Louisiana String Band (Louisiana Folklife Recording Series, LP-002).

Since Ol' Garbriel's Time (Louisiana Folklife Recording Series, LP-003).

Rose of My Heart (Rounder Records 0206).

Suggested videotapes

Cradle of the Stars: The Story of the Louisiana Hayride, by Rick Smith and Carol Leslie. 59 minute color video. Louisiana Public Broadcasting, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Something Nobody Else Has: The Story of Turtle Trapping in Louisiana, by Lee Aber and Rich Fuhanin. 29 minute color video. Hawksbill Productions, Shreveport, Louisiana.



Blacks in cities such as Shreveport, once the home of Huddie Ledbetter ("Leadbelly"). Country blues musicians can also still be found in the rural hill areas, although they usually perform privately at home for family and neighbors. Many who played blues have switched to gospel music because it has more positive connotations.

The fondness for gospel music among both Blacks and Anglos is another reflection of the pervasive Protestantism which binds the region yet allows each group its own interpretation of tradition. Liking the region to a patchwork quilt, anthropologist H. F. Gregory suggests that north Louisiana is an arrangement of strips bound by this Protestant tradition. Thus in the patchwork of north Louisiana, Black, Anglo, Indian and mixed groups; urban and rural; yeoman and planter exist side by side, bound by a common regional tradition. Likewise, folk traditions exist beside mainstream American culture, just as older cotton strips are stitched to newer polyester knit fabrics in traditional regional quilts. Despite encroaching urbanization, the conservative Protestant world view and its work ethic continue to foster the existence of folk traditions in north Louisiana which are still as rich and colorful as the patchwork quilts made there.