



The American South

A Circle Unbroken — Celebrations in the American South

William Ferris

*Will the circle be unbroken,
By and by, Lord, by and by?
There's a better home awaiting,
In the sky, Lord, in the sky.*

Traditional hymn



The Neshoba County Fair in central Mississippi has grown in the past 100 years from an annual picnic gathering started by families of nearby farms to a homecoming in early August attracting as many as 35,000 people daily. Founder's Square cabins (pictured), handed down in families from one generation to the next, date from the event's earliest days.

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The American South is famous for her celebrations. Each year Southerners celebrate holidays with dance, food, and music in every part of their region. Southern celebrations range in size from small family reunions to internationally known festivals such as Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Celebrations connect Southerners to each other and to their history, bonding them to family, community, and region in special, enduring ways.

Southern celebrations are often religious. Sacred Harp hymns, one of America's oldest musical traditions, are celebrated each year at all-day sings in rural churches throughout the Deep South. After singing hymns for several hours in the morning, singers adjourn at noon for their renowned "Dinner on the Grounds." Each singer contributes his or her favorite dish, and tables become heavily laden with delicious food. Grandparents, parents, and

children visit together over dinner and after the meal return to the church, where they sing Sacred Harp hymns throughout the afternoon. These all-day events connect the living with the dead as singers recall the favorite hymns of deceased friends. Hymns welcome the spirit of the absent loved ones back into the celebration.

The most important celebration in Southern churches is baptism, which in both Black and White churches takes place in late summer and early fall. For a week before the ceremony, members of the church meet each evening in a revival service. During revival week the minister and his congregation urge those not yet baptized to join the church. People of all ages "get religion" at the revival and often become visibly possessed by the spirit of the Holy Ghost as they dance in the church.

On the following Sunday the baptism ceremony takes place. The preacher walks with his deacons into a lake or stream until the water reaches their waists. Dressed in long robes, they summon the new converts one by one, and after a traditional ceremony of prayers, chanting, and singing they dip each convert completely under the water. The newly baptized sometimes emerge from the water shouting and singing, as the congregation standing on the bank sings hymns to welcome the new members of their church.

While baptism traces its origins in the Christian faith back to the New Testament story of John the Baptist, the ceremony also has religious roots in Africa, where it is believed evil spirits can be cast off into water. With their religious roots in both Africa and Europe, Black and White Southerners embrace a common belief in baptism. Both respond with deep emotion to the hymn that beckons new believers to "wade in the water." Baptism bonds the religious community every year and forever marks a believer's entry into the church.

Christmas is another important religious celebration in the South. Marked by the



sharing of gifts among family and friends, it is also a time to give to those less fortunate. In some communities the poor visit homes with their traditional cry of "Christmas gifts," as they request gifts from their neighbors.

Christmas dinner is the most lavish meal of the year. Women of all ages gather in the kitchen to prepare it; men carve the cooked meats and help in serving. Often, wild game such as turkey, duck, rabbit, venison, quail, dove, and fish are served with special seasonings, nuts, vegetables, and desserts. At these meals many Southerners raise glasses filled with wine to make their Christmas toasts. Throughout the day, while preparing, eating, and cleaning up the Christmas dinner, every Southern home is filled with stories told by each generation, and conversations flow almost without end. With tales as rich as the foods served at dinner, Christmas Day is a unique and memorable celebration.

Annual fairs are a custom that dates back to the Middle Ages; Southern agricultural fairs began in the nineteenth century. One of the earliest was in Macon, Georgia, in 1831. The state fair is usually held in the state capital in September or October, and is a major event. At its heart is the midway, with familiar sounds of barkers luring curious customers to pay to see strip tease artists, freak shows, tattooed men, and trained animals.

County fairs are held in small towns and usually feature more local attractions, such as 4-H Club demonstrations and beauty pageants. Some county fairs attract large numbers of visitors. The Neshoba County Fair in Mississippi features political rallies, a midway, and horse races. Such fairs are the highlight of a community's year, and over time many become institutions for the entire state.

Trade days held in Southern communities each month also harken back to European roots. First Monday has occurred in Ripley, Mississippi, every month for over 150 years. Like trade days in Scotland, Ireland, and England, First Monday began as an exchange of horses, mules, and cattle. Today automobiles, tractors, radios, and televisions change hands each month along with bird dogs and horses.

The Southern family reunion stresses the Festival of American Folklife 1996

importance of ancestors and kinship. My grandmother was fond of saying that "blood is thicker than water," a proverb with which every Southerner can identify. As the hymn "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" suggests, many Southerners believe their family celebrations will continue even in the afterlife. They believe family reunions will continue after death as deceased kinfolk reunite in an unbroken circle.

Alex Haley's *Roots* inspired both Black and White Southerners to research their ancestry and embrace their kinfolk. Today family reunions in the South often draw hundreds of people from throughout the nation, who celebrate family ties with dinner together and special T-shirts designed for the occasion. At some reunions parents who worked as sharecroppers welcome back children who have graduated from college and hold professional jobs. These reunions remind us how parents have used education to help their children escape the poverty they have known. Reunions often celebrate both family kinship and family success.

By far the most widely known Southern celebration is Mardi Gras, or "Fat Tuesday." With ancient roots in pre-Roman rites of spring and in Roman rites of Bacchanalia and Saturnalia, the event now marks the transition to the Lenten season of fasting as part of the Catholic calendar. In rural Louisiana French-speaking Black Creoles and White Cajuns celebrate Mardi Gras masked and on horseback, while in the Gulf Coast cities of Biloxi, Mobile, and New Orleans Mardi Gras means formal balls, informal parties, and parades with floats.

The most elaborate Mardi Gras celebration



More than sixty parades wind through New Orleans during Carnival season, which leads up to Mardi Gras on Shrove Tuesday. Krewes organizations that parody European nobility toss handfuls of "throws" (doubloons and beads) from colorful floats during parades that stream through dozens of neighborhoods. The parades and formal balls mark the last day of revelry before the Lenten season.

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each year is in New Orleans, where thousands of onlookers watch parades of Black and White masqueraders atop large floats that move slowly through the streets. These floats represent over sixty *krewe*s or organizations from all parts of the city. Some, such as Comus, Momus, Proteus, and Rex, have existed since the nineteenth century. During Mardi

Gras the entire city appears to have donned masks and entered the streets. Its normal life halted, New Orleans assumes a festive, dreamlike quality. No other city parties so intensely and for so long.

Each year during Mardi Gras the middle-class and elite Black community organizes floats for their Zulu Parade, while working-class Blacks dress

Indians chant and sing music that has inspired famed New Orleans performers like Aaron Neville and the Neville Brothers Band.

Another famous New Orleans celebration is the jazz funeral. When a jazz musician dies, a jazz band marches to the cemetery playing a hymn such as "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" slowly, as a dirge. The leader of the band sometimes carries an umbrella with a dove on top. The dove symbolizes peace, and the umbrella both shades the leader from the sun and suggests a tempo to the band.

Once the deceased musician is buried, the band leaves the cemetery playing upbeat, happy tunes like "When the Saints Go Marching In." Following closely behind the musicians are the "second line," a group of dancers whose performance makes the musical celebration in honor of the dead even more festive. In the folk song "St. James Infirmary," also known as the "Dying Crapshooter's Blues," a dying musician requests that after his death he be dressed elegantly and given a jazz funeral.

*When I die, put me in a long pine box,
And dress me in a Stetson hat,
Put a gold piece on my watch chain,
So the boys will know I'm standing pat.
Put a jazz band on my tail gate.
Let's raise hell as we travel along.*

No matter how large or small, every celebration fills an important role in the region's life. The smallest such event, the family dinner, is arguably the South's most meaningful celebration. Families gather each day for their main meal, or dinner, to celebrate an institution dear to every Southern heart. Parents and children converse and share food to reaffirm kinship at its most basic level — the nuclear family. While perhaps modest by some standards, dinner is the principal reason why the region's circle of family will always remain unbroken.



Church members prepare the sacraments at Rose Hill Baptist Church in Vicksburg, Mississippi.

Photo by William Ferris,
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as Mardi Gras Indians. Wearing elaborate costumes made with feathers and beads, these "Indians" mix Native American with Afro-Caribbean traditions of costumes that cost thousands of dollars, require months of work to assemble, and weigh as much as 100 pounds. Carnival Indian figures such as Big Chief, Spyboy, Wildman, and Li'l Chief are easily recognizable by their costumes, which represent tribes with names like the Yellow Pocahontas and the Wild Tchoupitoulas. As they move through the streets, Mardi Gras



As in every society, the forces of modern life have dramatically changed the Southern family and its activities. Heads of families are often single mothers or fathers. Television, radio, and computer distract family members from conversations and meals in ways that would appear strange to earlier generations. Soap operas, wrestling matches, and top-40 tunes reach almost every Southern home through satellite dishes and cable television. Casinos, the most recent new feature on the Southern landscape, have become colorful centers for dining, entertainment, and gambling in the region. But even within these new worlds, traditional celebrations continue to nourish the roots of Southern family and community.

Black families living in Texas have long commemorated their emancipation from slavery with Juneteenth celebrations. The festival marks the anniversary of Major General Gordon Granger's arrival in Galveston on June 19, 1865, to announce the emancipation of slaves and to assume command of the District of Texas after the Civil War. Since that time Juneteenth celebrations have spread to Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama, Florida, and even California. The largest numbers of Blacks who recognize the holiday are in Texas, where in 1950 over 70,000 people gathered at the Texas State Fair in Dallas for a Juneteenth celebration. Festivities include parades, picnics, baseball, speeches on freedom, and dances. In other parts of the South, Blacks celebrate the Fourth of July as a holiday associated with emancipation.

The South's many ethnic groups include Germans, Greeks, French, Haitians, Irish, Italians, Jews, Lumbees, Mexicans, Scotch-Irish, Highland Scots, Spanish, Syrians, Lebanese, and Irish travelers. Each has important celebrations that reflect its unique culture.

Southern Jews, for example, have adapted their religious holidays in ways that are distinctly Southern. The Anshe Chesed Synagogue

in Vicksburg, Mississippi, celebrates Sukkot, an agricultural festival in the fall, by decorating its Sukkot booth with cotton, soybeans, and sugar cane as well as the traditional fruits and vegetables. In the fall, Southern Jews often schedule their evening Shabbat services so as to allow young people to attend Friday night football games. Southern Jews also modify



foods used at their celebrations. A Memphis family recalls how they prepared Passover gefilte fish with decidedly unkosher catfish, and in New Orleans kosher families have developed recipes for matzoh-ball gumbo.

Southerners with Asian roots include Chinese, Filipinos, Koreans, Vietnamese, Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders. Chinese Southerners celebrate their New Year with fireworks, a festive dinner, and symbolic red decorations. In areas like the Mississippi Delta, Chinese families travel for many miles to gather together for their New Year celebration.

Each year Italian families in New Orleans celebrate the Feast of St. Joseph, in which they display food on home altars. Residents visit neighbors' homes, sharing food and hospitality in a festivity that mixes religion with delight in cuisine.

Native American communities in the South include Catawbans, Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, Lumbees, Seminoles, and Virginia Indians. Each summer the Mississippi

Fife and drum music is still played at celebrations in Senatobia, Mississippi, and other parts of the South.

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Band of Choctaws celebrates its traditions of music, dance, food, stickball, and basket-making at an annual fair that draws thousands of visitors to its community in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Cherokees feature similar traditions from their culture each year at the Cherokee Fall Festival in Scottsboro, Alabama.

Today a growing number of annual Southern

celebrations feature the region's diverse culture. Musical festivals celebrate blues, bluegrass, old-time fiddling, Acadian music, clogging, and jazz. Literary conferences celebrate William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty, the printed book, and storytelling. Even lowly catfish, crawfish, and kudzu have their own festivals. Food lovers can also find annual festivals devoted to seafood, peanuts, apples, pumpkins, and sorghum. And, yes, there are even Southern festivals that celebrate mules, tobacco spitting, and turkey calling.

As every Southerner loves a good party with ample food, drink, and storytelling, the region's celebrations will surely continue to expand. Whenever a Southern community discovers a local tradition it wants to share, a new celebration is born. And while Mardi Gras will always be the biggest fish, more and more minnows swim and grow larger year by year. And why not? As Louisiana Cajuns are fond of saying, "*Laissez les bon temps rouler*" — "Let the good times roll." Each of us deserves at least one good party every year. So, as Southerners, we say, "Let's celebrate."

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Suggested Reading

Center for the Study of Southern Culture. 1989. *Southern Culture Catalog*. Oxford: University of Mississippi Press.

Wilson, Charles Reagon, and William Ferris. 1989. *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

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