Louisiana Folklife: A Guide to the State

By George A. Stokes

This essay originally appeared in Folklife in Louisiana: A Guide to the State published by the Office of Cultural Development in 1985. This essay is provided online courtesy of the editor since the publication is out of print.

Editor's Introduction

Work traditions in Louisiana are as diverse as the state’s peoples and products. The settings of work have ranged from fishing and foraging to slavery and sharecropping over the last two hundred years. Recent rapid industrialization has diminished many traditional skills and forms of work, particularly those based in agriculture and exploitation of the environment for food. Yet traditions persist and accommodations are made: shrimpers and trappers add seasonal work in the oilfield to their annual rounds, crawfish farms enter the realm of agribusiness, and all types of products and activities are celebrated at festivals and related contests dedicated to petroleum and rice, nutria skinning, and oyster shucking.

It is useful to break occupational folklife into two categories. First there are traditional occupations. In Louisiana these could include blacksmithing, fishing, boat making, and farming in rural settings to name but a few. These are jobs with long standing definitions of roles and skills passed on in informal settings to new workers who may be family members (in the case of fishing and farming) to non-kin apprentices (in the case of blacksmithing or housebuilding trades). Second, one could look at occupational traditions. These are usually components such as beliefs, lore, tools, and costumery and are informally but effectively communicated within an occupational group. They could range from traditional tall tales about John Henry figures in the old railroad camps to newer heroes of the oil patch. Standards of initiation are often involved in such traditions whereby, for example, the newest roustabouts in the oilfield are called “Worms,” the lowest of the low, and experienced men are referred to as “hands.”

Almost any occupational group involved in services from taxicab drivers to pullman porters has stories about old or distasteful customers. Within groups such as cotton press workers or field hands there are always narratives about the boss’s follies presented in song and story form. One could look at occupational costumes from flowered cotton welding caps to rubber boots fitted with spurs for those Cajun cowboys working on the prairie marshland of southwest Louisiana. Whatever the stylistic or functional base for occupational costume, there is also a huge range of tools such as seine nets, crab cars, moss spinners, and axe handles that make traditional work possible. Perhaps the best cataloging of the traditional tools, ideas, and activities associated with work have come from cultural geographers who look at what man has traditionally made by hand on and or from the land. A good example of this sort of work is Malcolm Comeaux’s Atchafalaya Swamp Life: Settlement and Folk Occupation (1972).

Much of the rest of Louisiana awaits similar works on its vast array of
Le coup de main is a tradition of helping neighbors bring in the crop when there aren’t enough hands or helping with machinery when it’s not available. It can also be a way of helping neighbors rebuild after destruction such as storms or fires. Ossun, LA 1977. Photo: Ginette Vachon.

Environments and cultures. In a state where the products are as varied as Perique tobacco and crawfish and the work force runs the gamut from rural white and black farmers to Cajun offshore workers and Vietnamese seafood processors, any essay on occupational folklife must be of an introductory nature. It is hoped that this introduction will spur further interest in and understanding of the way we define work activities and roles as part of tradition now and in the future.

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Introduction

It has been said that “Louisiana has many faces” (Rogers and Watson 1969: 285). It is equally true that Louisiana has many hands. The people who followed the Indians to this state have been coming from different countries and different continents for nearly two centuries, and the immigrations are still going on. As the new arrivals seek to establish themselves, they bring to their new occupations the work-related methods, customs, knowledge, attitudes, artifacts, and vernaculars that were parts of their cultural inheritance. The variety of cultural backgrounds represented among the people of Louisiana is matched by the range of natural environments found here. This diversity of physical settings has provided Louisianians with unusual latitude in the choice of occupations, the selection of natural resources, and access to natural settings of many kinds.

Similarly, the nature of Louisiana’s location and history have contributed to cultural complexity. At the mouth of the Mississippi River, Louisiana was squeezed between rival empires and, later, the young United States. Political decisions made in distant capitals sometimes affected people here to an unusual degree. It is apparent that unique circumstances of environment and multi-culturation have made Louisiana a rich repository of folklore related to work. One who undertakes to learn the “techniques, gestures, oral expressions, and customs” (McCarl 1978: 16) of almost any occupation should be prepared for challenges. Sources of Louisiana occupational folklore range from a conversation with a pulpwood cutter to archives in Madrid and Paris.

The following commentary is not intended to be a complete inventory of occupations associated at one time or another with Louisiana. Its object is to suggest the diversity of occupations pursued by Louisianians. The order in which they are mentioned has no significance here.

Agriculture

People who came to Louisiana and took up farming found themselves at work on natural levees, in backswamps, on pine hills and prairie grasslands, loessial bluffs, river bottoms, and coastal cheniers. It is said that no work is more difficult than “breaking new ground,” and the first farmers here found tasks ahead of them that at times must have seemed impossible. The work often was made even more arduous by heat, floods, drought, hurricanes, plant diseases, insects, and other natural hazards. Despite these obstacles, Louisiana agriculture has evolved into a highly productive system based on cattle, cotton, soybeans, rice, dairying, and a great variety of other products. Perhaps the most difficult settlement to establish in Louisiana was that made by the Germans who took up lands along the banks of the Mississippi River just above New Orleans in 1721. Leaving the ancient and beautifully-tended fields of the Old World, they moved into a nightmare, a virgin forest in the heavy alluvial bottoms of a great river in a humid subtropical climate. This land, covered with giant oaks, vines, and heavy growth of all kinds, supported a large wild animal population and was subject to annual flooding. Work began along the Côté des Allemands with axes, hoes, and shovels. Practically no work animals were available, but within a few years farms were producing enough vegetables for some to be sold in New Orleans. Before long, river travelers were admiring the neat white cottages along the banks, and when famine came to New Orleans in 1708, the town was saved by food from the German Coast. In south Louisiana, for a long time there was a saying about any unusually difficult task: “It takes German people to do
In some areas of Louisiana traditional methods of bundling and loading sugar cane can still be found using a winch, pulley, and manpower. Photograph: Nicholas R. Spitzer.

Sugar cane is a crop long associated with Louisiana. First attempts at cane cultivation were not impressive, but with the failure of indigo and the development of processes for granulating sugar, the rise of the industry began (Nichols 1956: 11). Cane cultivation here often has been troubled by labor shortages, and various attempts have been made to solve that chronic problem. Slaves, German, and Irish immigrants and others were employed in the cane fields. Several investors brought in Chinese laborers who were thought to be experts at cane cultivation. Living up to the reputation of Chinese around the world, they worked hard and well and got along with everyone (Cohen 1978: 7).

Tobacco, a New World plant widely used by the Indians, was taken up by European colonists and the habit soon caught on in Europe. By 1620, tobacco had become a major export item in the English colonies (Bining 1943: 60). Newcomers to Louisiana were quick to try tobacco as both consumers and producers, so that in 1817, an agent reporting to the Spanish captain-general of Cuba on conditions in the southwest stated that, “The fame of Natchitoches tobacco is worldwide” (Carpenter 1947: 725).

In “Evangeline,” Longfellow wrote:

Lighting his pipe that was filled with sweet Natchitoches tobacco. Thus he spake to his guests, who listened, And smiled as they listened...

Tobacco cultivation in Louisiana was encouraged by both French and Spanish colonial administrations. Production centered around Natchez and Natchitoches and was expanding rapidly until undercut by Cuban competition. The tightly rolled bundles of tobacco called carottes by the French and andullos by the Spanish were acceptable for a time as a medium of exchange (Nunley 1967: 4). Today, Louisiana tobacco production is limited to southern St. James Parish. The dark Perique tobacco is cured by a process introduced about 1825 and is widely popular in tobacco blends in Europe (Ellzey 1962: 5). The first orange groves in Louisiana were planted about 1800 in Plaquemines Parish south of New Orleans (Fogarty 1963: 2). A traveler going downstream on the Mississippi River in 1821 reported seeing orange groves beginning at Pointe Coupee (Duffy 1957: 55). Efforts to grow oranges of several kinds commercially have continued with results at best only mildly successful. Principal inhibitors have been early killing frosts and hurricanes, both of which have damaged groves severely from time to time.

Between 1890 and 1914, numbers of immigrants from the Dalmatian coast of Yugoslavia came to Louisiana, some of whom engaged in orange cultivation south of New Orleans (Vujnovich 1974: 61). It is believed that the Yugoslavs introduced the process of making the delicious orange wine so popular in south Louisiana (Fogarty 1963: 6). The Midwesterners who attempted to found a settlement called Loranger in southeast Louisiana also attempted to raise oranges but without success (Bennett 1970: 98).

In several instances, Louisiana farmers have used animals for farm work in ways that are somewhat unusual. For a time a number of cotton planters in Natchitoches Parish experimented with the employment of geese as substitutes for the large gangs of hoe-wielding black plantation hands formerly required to keep the rows clean. These geese ate the young grass as it sprouted and kept the cotton untouched. These birds were employed at the rate of about 1.5 per acre, and handled the job satisfactorily (Highsmith 1964: 31). Along somewhat similar lines was the experiment on a large sugar plantation in which sheep were turned into the cane fields just after their cultivation in the spring. The sheep did well on the sprouting grass, keeping the rows clean, while the cane was left alone (Nichols 1958: 36).

An animal widely known and respected in Louisiana is the "Catahoula Hogdog," also called the "Catahoula Hound," or the "Catahoula Cur." Perhaps the terms "widely known and respected" are inadequate. A few years ago the state legislature of Louisiana proclaimed the Catahoula Hound to be the official state dog. One observer describes the Catahoula...
...graceful, well-built animals. The body is strong with heavy shoulders, broad chest, rather long and powerful neck. Coloring always includes dark splotches to a greater or lesser degree. A blue leopard has dark splotches on a bluish background; white dogs have splotches scattered over them; brindled dogs are dark, but the splotches are darker than the background. All have white on them feet, collar, and chest. Some leopards have a tawny background. An adult male weighs about 65 pounds. They can be trained to handle any kind of stock, be watch dogs or hunt. (McGuffee 1965: 44)

The hog-dog barked and snapped at the hogs, inducing them to chase him. As they pursued, the dog led them into a prepared and camouflaged pen. The dog then escaped from the pen and the raging hogs by jumping the fence. It is said that when the wild hogs realized they were trapped, they would lie on the ground, kicking and squealing as if in torment. Sometimes the dogs were employed in handling tamer swine. Pigs that escaped from pens were retrieved by the dog. When he found a runaway pig, the dog seized him by an ear and held him, struggling and squealing, until the owner came. One newcomer to Louisiana in 1945 watched in amazement as a hog-dog quickly and efficiently rounded up a number of pigs that had escaped from a truck parked on a residential street in Winnfield (Deahl 1945).

Pigs introduced into Louisiana by colonists escaped and found life in the wild much to their liking. The swamps and forests provided plenty of food and cover, and there were few natural enemies that could handle the long-legged, bristly and grouchy "razorbacks." The wild hogs were an important food item for many settlers and later for others during the Depression years. From time to time the pigs were rounded up. Some were killed for food, some were sold, and others were marked to show ownership and released.

"Marking" wild hogs was accomplished by cutting a combination of basic marks in the hog's ear, counterparts to the brands so much part of cattle-country lore. Marks could be registered, and a farmer could lay claim to all hogs bearing his mark within five miles of his residence. The basic marks bore such names as "crop," "bit," "hack," "swallow-fork," "split," and "figure seven." A farmer's individual mark usually was some combination of the basic forms, such as, "under figure seven," "swallow-fork split," and "crop and upper half crop" (Fluitt 1971: 213).

The range-cattle industry here has undergone major expansion in recent years, but it is far from being new to the Louisiana scene. The early French settlers were in desperate need of livestock and for a time they carried on a clandestine trade with their Spanish rivals. They met to bargain at Campti, near Natchitoches, about 1718 (Eversull 1961: 137). For a time cattle were shipped from Natchitoches to New Orleans to take advantage of high prices there. Later, cattle were introduced into the Louisiana prairie country by the Acadians about 1765. Livestock did well there, and by 1800 cattle were plentiful.

Crop dusting is a distinctive occupation related to agriculture that has been followed in Louisiana for more than half a century. The first plane used here was flown in 1926 by a company based in Monroe. The plane is now in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, and the flying service that operated it has grown into Delta Air Lines (Maxwell 1968: 391). Most of the powerful old Stearman biplanes once so widely used in agricultural aviation are retired. New aircraft spray herbicides, insecticides, defoliants, fertilizers, and seed, and frighten away ricebirds. The planes save time, avoid soil compaction, and can operate when the fields are too wet for tractors. More than 200 companies are now flying in Louisiana. Occasionally, at local airports, one may see the young pilots of supersonic jet aircraft from some nearby air force base studying with obvious awe the frail planes the dusters fly.

Forests

The exploitation of Louisiana's forests began with the arrival of the first
settlers and still ranks as a major occupation. People, processes, and products have changed, and each change has made its contribution to the lore of Louisiana lumbering. The forests yielded much of value to the settlers. Wood was the universal material, and great stands of useful species were found here. It was used for houses, furniture, fences, flatboats, firewood, barrel staves, sewers, sidewalks, tanks, cisterns, charcoal, coffins, and a thousand other things. In French colonial days, slaves were set to work cutting cypress for sale when plantation fields lay idle in the winter. Later, German and Irish immigrants were hired for that dangerous work so that valuable slaves would not be endangered (Conway 1962: 9).

Indians long had cut cypress logs to make the dugout canoes the French learned to use, and quantities had been cut for local use and sale. When the large-scale cutting of cypress began about 1876, most of the virgin timber still remained. Great stands of cypress grew in the swamps, and loggers there came to be known as “swampers.” In dry seasons the thick-based trees were cut by men standing on scaffolds five or six feet above the ground. Trees in flooded swamps fell to loggers who worked standing in “piragues,” the tiny cypress boats copied from the Indian dugouts. Many of the early swampers were Cajuns (Norgress 1947: 979). The timber was cut in winter and spring, to be floated on the “June Rise.” Floating logs were moved about by “pull boats,” at first powered by steam and later by automobile engines. Skidders were mounted on barges, and in that watery world the swampers lived in “quarter boats.”

Settlers entering the vast Louisiana pineries built their log houses and barns with the long, straight trunks, and split more for rails to be used in the angular “snake” fences they built to keep animals out of their fields. Many farmers set fire to the woods in winter in the belief that it would get rid of vermin and make the grass grow better in the spring. A woods-burner had to be careful. If his fire destroyed someone’s rail fence, built at the cost of so much sweat, his troubles were likely to be serious.

The pine hill settler usually was poor, but he was fiercely independent and enjoyed his isolated life. Some said that if you could hear your neighbor’s axe, the country was getting too crowded. Whenever possible these farmers augmented their incomes by cutting fuel for steamboats and locomotives. With the coming of the era of intensive logging in the Louisiana pine forests, about 1890, many men left their farms to work for a dollar a day for the lumber companies. Some worked at the mills while others toiled at the “front,” the place in the forest where the trees were falling. Many lived in company towns, others at “camps,” temporary settlements at or near the front. In the boom days of logging, it was said that a man who was fired could walk down the railroad track to the next sawmill town and be at work again before dark. Areas of work other than the mills and the front were the logging railroads and turpentine stills or some other company operation.

The intensive system of lumbering that prevailed in Louisiana until about 1930 was based on black and white Louisianians, Mexicans, and company employees brought here from places as far away as Michigan and Missouri. Some of these people left when the mills “cut out,” but many remained behind to form the cadre of the state’s first sizable industrial population.

The industries based on the exploitation of Louisiana forests today are much changed. They depend primarily upon trucks and highways rather than oxen and railroads. Sawmills are generally smaller. Forest products are more varied and now include such items as paper, plywood, and particle board manufactured at plants located here.

Like the Louisiana logger, the folklorist has rich resources at hand in the story of Louisiana lumbering. The swampers, the log-rafters, the railroaders, the land speculators, and others are all attractive figures whose stories are far from complete (Stokes 1981: 1).

Minerals

Louisiana’s mineral wealth is well displayed in an array of oil and gas fields, mines, refineries, processing plants, and associated industrial establishments. Principal minerals produced have been oil, natural gas, sulphur, and salt. New developments based on lignite, a low-grade coal are beginning to assume major proportions. Many early accounts of travel in Louisiana have made reference to mines and mineral deposits of one kind or another supposedly hidden in some remote part of the state. Lead mines and coal mines were mentioned long before the first gusher came in near Jennings in 1901.

Lignite, the “new” energy source now so much in the news, was being
Mentioned in early writings is the boeuf sauvage, or wild ox. This was the bison. Bayou Terre aux Boeuf in St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes was named for the buffalo which wintered there. Useful for their meat and hides, the buffalo were excellent guides and left clearly marked trails through unmapped swamps and to fords along many streams (Anonymous 1931: 35).

The muskrat is probably the best known fur animal of Louisiana. While the Attakapas Indians near New Orleans used buffalo skins about 1732, they knew nothing of the muskrat. Trapping the muskrat began in southeastern Louisiana about 1900. There the marshes were burned regularly to facilitate alligator hunting, and this prompted growth of the grasses which made up the muskrat's food supply. The muskrat population grew rapidly, spreading westward into Texas. There, in 1912, ranchers placed a bounty on the muskrats because of their damage to

Wildlife

Louisiana has always been the home of wildlife notable for both variety and numbers. Animals were important elements in Indian cultures here and appear in many of their stories. Accounts left by the early French include descriptions of the cougar, raccoon, opossum, beaver, deer, black bear, rabbit, fox, mink, and squirrel. Another animal was described this way: "There is also a sort of animal, rather pretty, but which for more than a league around befouls the air with the stench of its urine, that is the reason why it has been called 'bête puant,' (stinking animal)" (Anonymous 1931: 35).

Excerpts. This clip presents the ubiquitous nature of crawfish in the Louisiana landscape. There is a three part process involved in the enjoyment of crawfish: farming the crawfish, boiling the crawfish and consuming the crawfish. This example presents several people speaking about the influence of crawfish and how each process occurs. The tradition of crawfish is evident from the passed on family knowledge of farming crawfish to the eating contests and community boils. Taken from Crawfish! Produced and Directed by Charles Bush, 1987. And Haunted Water, Fragile Lands: Oh, What Tales To Tell. Directed by Glen Pitre. Produced for Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program, 1994.
Crawfisherman Hally Barras of Catahoula checks his bait in the Atchafalaya Basin. Photograph: Nicholas R. Spitzer. Smithsonian Institution.

The number of muskrats has fluctuated with drought, marsh fires, hurricanes, salt water invasions, and other disasters, but he has always returned and so has the trapper. The occupation is threatened now by a far more dangerous competitor; south Louisiana is a rapidly developing area, and most young people favor the opportunities open to them outside of the great marshes. Louisiana wildlife supports another occupation: that of the fishing camp operator and guide. A great increase in the number of people in this work has taken place around Louisiana's freshwater lakes. The operator may be in charge of a lodge with tennis courts and swimming pool, or he may be limited to a grassy spot on a lakeshore where he has a few boats for rent. In either case, the establishment is likely to be called a "camp."

A 1960 survey found thirty-six commercial fishing and hunting camps and 168 privately owned camps located around three lakes in northwest Louisiana, and their numbers have increased considerably (Radasinovich 1961: 19). The commercial camp operators rent boats and other equipment and sell fishing and camping supplies. Sometimes fishing guides are available, and a few people have become famous as successful competitors in fishing contests in which prizes amount to thousands of dollars. Their vocabularies feature such terms as "boat roads," "structures," and "schooling bass." Louisiana lakes and streams, once crowded with edible fish of many kinds, are increasingly subject to man-made change and pollution. Some people keep alive the ancient craft of net making, however. While it seems that there are fewer freshwater commercial fishermen plying their trade each year, no less than 10,617 licenses for that occupation were sold here in 1975 (Anonymous 1978: 31).

The Work of Women

Any review of folklife resources related to occupations surely must include some of those areas in which the work of women was essential. One such area would be that of the housewife who, for generations in Louisiana, made homes in log cabins, railroad work cars, trapper's huts, city slums, mobile homes, and every other sort of dwelling imaginable. In earlier times this woman knew how to avoid illnesses, how to prepare food for people of all ages, and knew a good bit about home medical and nursing care. She promoted the religious life of the family, saw to the rearing and education of the children, and cared for aged parents. Often, through her efforts, the family was supplied with milk, butter, eggs, soap, and fresh vegetables. She cooked, washed, ironed, sewed, mended, cleaned house, and swept the yard. It was true that, "Man works from sun to sun, but woman's work is never done."

The hard and dangerous work of ministering to the sick was one of the few occupations that could be taken up professionally by women who had to support themselves. As "practical" nurses they could follow the instructions of a physician and, when nothing better was at hand, they employed ancient remedies, sometimes with surprising results. Many older Louisianians remember names like "asafoetida," and "antiphlogistine," An eminent Baton Rouge physician treated me with the latter medication in 1948.

Until recently, boarding houses stood in almost every town, and many of them were managed by women. The boarding house was usually a large frame building, two or three stories high, where rooms were rented by the day, week, or month and where meals were sold. Often the boarding house was near and facing the railroad depot. With room and board went the privilege of sitting on the porch and watching people get on and off the trains. Even a small town might have five or six passenger trains a day, so the watchers had plenty to do. Considerable humor was associated with bachelor life in the boarding house. Jokes were frequent about how far boarders could stretch for food at the dinner table, and a tall man was said to have a good "boarding house reach." It was sometimes said that table etiquette required that each diner keep one foot on the floor at all times during a meal. Several popular newspaper comic strips were based on boarding house life.

Boarding house meals traditionally were well prepared and bountiful. A supper, for which a non-roomer could be charged as much as a dollar, might offer platters of pork chops, meat loaf, roast beef, rice, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, turnips, green beans, lima beans, squash, corn bread, rolls, potato salad, pie, cake, coffee, milk, and buttermilk. The diner could eat as much as he could hold. During a trip with Harold N. Fisk in 1947, we stopped for a meal at a boarding house he knew of in the cattle range. In Cameron Parish, ranchers paid five cents per tail.
Tallulah, Louisiana. The price of the meal was $1.50. Any woman who could manage such an establishment, keeping everything in spotless condition, buying the food and seeing to its preparation, and all the other things that had to be done regularly and well, had to have managerial skills of a high order. Many women did it, and showed a profit.

From The Past Into The Present

Louisiana has its share of uncommon occupations. A good example is the work of the Mississippi River bar pilot, which has been described as "... a little-known, never studied, functionally important occupation" (Salomone 1967: 39). The delta of the Mississippi River extending into the Gulf of Mexico is of an extremely rare type. Instead of forming a deep estuary, like that of the Hudson River at New York, or a classic arcuate delta such as that of the Nile, the Mississippi’s fine sediments extend long fingers of low-lying land into the gulf. Distributary channels flow along these fingers, emptying into the gulf through outlets locally called “passes.” The water at the mouth of each pass is made extremely shallow by the presence of a “bar” of mud and sand which endangers ships entering or leaving the pass.

The first to guide ships navigating the passes were Indians, who were of little help. They were replaced by French and later by Spanish under those colonial administrations. Regulation was nonexistent, and by 1800 the bartown of Balize had become, “The wildest, rawest place in all Louisiana.” (Salomone 1967: 43). So remote was Balize that the Spanish governor Antonio de Ulloa sought to banish all Louisiana lepers to its shores (Kalish 1973: 489). After the United States assumed control, conditions began to improve. Pilots were required to be licensed after 1836 and extremely rigid standards have been maintained since. Some of the men are called "Tocko" pilots, a slang term denoting an American-born person of Slavic descent.

Some occupations flourished for a time and then largely disappeared from the scene. One of these was the ferry operator. Louisiana's drainage system is widespread and complex, with some 15,000 miles of navigable waterways and countless smaller streams. Under these circumstances travelers were faced constantly with water crossings of every magnitude. Sometimes creeks could be crossed by "cooning" along a log. Others required the use of rafts, or "floats," and at wider crossings in settled areas ferries were common. Often the provision of ferry service at a river crossing was the responsibility of the parish police jury. The jury usually auctioned off the privilege of operating the ferry to the highest bidder. The person chosen agreed to provide a ferry of a certain capacity, make a specified number of crossings per day and charge standard rates according to an agreed-upon schedule (Williamson 1939: 191). For many years the ferries provided the most practical kind of service in a state where streams were so numerous. Since 1925, when large-scale bridging began, the ferries have largely disappeared, although a few still cross the Mississippi River at major cities (Gritzner 1963: 222).

A state as laced with streams as Louisiana surely will be notable for the importance of boats in the lives of many people. Boats here have operated in waters of all kinds and served many purposes. In some places, children rode "schoolboats" to school every day, rather than buses. The making of boats was traditionally carried on by those who used them for fishing, hunting, or trapping. Louisiana folk boats cover a great diversity of types that are adapted to our coastal, bayou, swamp, and lake environments. They include pirogue, chaland, esquif (skiff), bateau and flat boat (Knipmeyer 1976: 108). All were constructed along traditional lines by local artisans (for a fuller treatment, see article by Comeaux on "Folk Boats" in Section III). Today, boats of aluminum are available for almost every purpose, even though the wooden boats in some respects are better than the metal ones. It is interesting to note that one of the oldest boats, the pirogue taken from the dugouts of the Indians, is still popular and even copied in fiberglass.

Whether he was of French, English, Spanish, German, or other ancestry, the blacksmith was an essential person in many Louisiana communities until near the opening of World War II. In earlier times the clanging hammers of these highly skilled workmen were a welcome sound in many towns. The smith worked in both wood and metal, and a good one's knowledge was surprising. He was especially skilled at improvisation. An
excellent knife could be made of a leaf from a buggy seat spring, for example. The blacksmith often invented, designed, and made unique tools for special tasks. Once its work was done, such a tool, perhaps nameless, might be hung on a wall or tossed under a workbench to await resurrection. In some ways modern blacksmiths and oilfield welders have followed in this special metal tool-creating tradition.

The blacksmith shop was usually located not far from the business section of the typical small town. Saturday was always a busy day, since the shop served as an unofficial headquarters for country folk in town for the day. Jobs for the smith were given to him, and while he worked gossip was exchanged, politics got a share of attention, and much whittling went on. Sometimes the smith added another facility to his shop, such as a grist mill. Once in a while the men of a saddened family would appear and quietly go about the work of making a cypress coffin. There was much good humor at the blacksmith's shop, and as at most male-dominated establishments, much of it was directed at the uninitiated. Many jokes were told of the newcomer or novice who did something awkwardly and then tried to pretend that he had known about it all along. One such story tells of the blacksmith who finished shaping a red hot horseshoe and threw it on the dirt floor to cool. Some minutes later, a city fellow came in and saw the shoe which had returned to its natural color but was still quite hot. He remarked that he had always wanted to look at a horseshoe, picked it up, and quickly threw it down again. The onlookers laughed and one asked him if the shoe was hot. "No," he said. "It just doesn't take me long to look at a horseshoe."

Another occupation of some stature in any Louisiana community, but one largely ignored by folklorists, was that of the gunsmith. His services, particularly in the earlier times, were essential. When one needed a gunsmith, no substitute would do. Many gunsmiths brought their skills directly from Europe, where their calling was old and highly respected. They had learned their trade in the exacting school of the Old World apprentice and they trained others in the same way. A craftsman in steel and walnut, the gunsmith was familiar with all types of firearms and understood the practical physics of ballistics and the chemistry of propellants and ignition systems. Specialists in this line of work were stockmakers and engravers, some of whom became internationally known. The high traditions of excellence displayed by the old-time gunsmiths now are preserved in the work places of a few craftsmen called "riflesmiths" and "pistolsmiths," who rebuild and modify standard firearms to meet the personal requirements of shooters of various kinds. A number of these people have lived in the Shreveport area since World War II.

Conclusion

The foregoing brief sketch of Louisiana's traditional occupations and occupational traditions is far from complete. Some important types of work, and their associated lore, which have been omitted, are included photographically here. These include moss gathering swampers, railroad men, oilfield "roughnecks," shrimpers, and crawfishermen. Service trades, from shoemaking to shoeshining, have also been beyond the scope of this initial commentary. The complex questions of ethnicity and class associated with traditional work also await a generation of folklorists, anthropologists, and cultural geographers. Certain associations of ethnicity and occupation include, for example, the Yugoslavians with the oyster industry, Cajuns with crawfishing, urban Italians and Irish in service trades (later replaced by blacks) and the legacy of Creoles of Color as artisan plasterers and ironworkers. On the other hand, the new industrial growth that has so altered our landscapes, communities and cultures has also altered work patterns. Anglo-Texans among other outsiders readily enter Louisiana's oilfields. Yet it is now possible to remain in a rural Louisiana community and "commute" to the offshore oilfield. Thus, while one may live on the land, one may not live off the land in the same way as in a foraging, hunting or agricultural economy.

There are both continuities and changes found in the traditions surrounding work in Louisiana. The observation of these links or the lack of them tells us much about the extent to which contemporary and future society and culture in our state will rely on skills of the hands and bounty of the land to make a livelihood. There is no doubt that work is a focal point for understanding the values and valued skills of a society from fisherman to forester and from oilfield driller to carpenter. As we learn how others earn and have earned their livings, we gain deeper and more
reliable insights into all aspects of their cultures and our own. As we come to know and understand them, we more fully know and understand ourselves.

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